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DASOBIQUIET

The Inevitability of Oversight

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The Inevitability of Oversight

by DAsObiQuiet

Summary

Anakin has been at the temple for a while now and his life seems to have stabilized, mostly. No small feat for a time-traveling former Sith. But, even with support from those in the know, this tentative balance can't last. It's only a matter of time before something gives, and with Sidious directly involved, he can only prepare and hope; not something he's exactly good at.

Sequel to Dangers of Foresight

Notes

Author's Note 1: This is a sequel/continuation of 'Hindsight is Not Perfect' and 'The Dangers of Foresight'. If you haven't read those, this probably won't make a lot of sense. Both can be found under my stories

AN 2: Because it has been requested, here is a timeline for the 'Hindsight' series. The following is in chronological order:

'**Hindsight is Not Perfect**' – 32 BBY

'**The Dangers of Foresight**' – 32-31 BBY

'**Sharing Outsight**' – Aprox 2 weeks after DoF ends

'**Warmth of Resight**' – Early 30 BBY, aprox 1 month before IoO begins.

'**The Inevitability of Oversight**' – Begins in 30 BBY (aprox 10 Galactic Standard months after DoF ends).

AN 3: Also, Anakin turned 10 not long after he reached the Temple, so he's 11 1/2, approaching the age of 12 right now. Well, physically.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jedi Knight Nuun Hutchik stood in front of the Jedi Council calmly, not allowing his lekku to so much as twitch. The fact that he didn't know *why* he'd been called before the High Council would have had him straining to hide the curling of his lekku only a few short years ago, but he'd been working on his control for a while and could now reap the reward of not looking like a nervous padawan in front of some of the most intimidating Jedi in the universe.

At least he hadn't been the only one called, although he couldn't really find a pattern judging from those others he knew, up to and including Master Jocasta Nu. She was one of the oldest historians and archivists in the Order, true, but Nuun himself specialized in sociology, especially those of the inner core. He gathered information about the political climate and ideals of the general populace in worlds where a Jedi had been requested most often. Although, as both a member of the order and the EduCorps, he'd also gone on his share of missions. He'd joined the EduCorps after he'd gone through his trials to become a knight and hadn't regretted the decision. However, some of the other people who had been called, other members of the EduCorps, didn't hold a Jedi rank as he and Master Nu (and a few others here) did. So it couldn't be a mission they'd been called for. No, he had the feeling that whatever the reason for the summons, it would require a lot of studying, searching and reading.

But then, why hadn't Master Nu, the lead archivist and the head of the EduCorps, called them and explained what they were to do? Why the High Council? What could the EduCorps have that the High Council needed? And why so many? The people here weren't fighters or defenders or negotiators or ambassadors. They were scholars and researchers in their specific fields – which varied greatly.

Over on the end of the line those called had organized themselves into, stood two people, both of which he knew. Ruoda Ooak, a duros specialist who had been reassigned at the age of thirteen and did not hold a Jedi rank, specialized in cultures of the Mid Rim. With her near-photographic memory for almost anything she'd been told, she

was one of the most revered EduCorps members for her age. The older human she spoke to was a Jedi Master, Tedrick Slilt who specialized in general Galactic history. Next to him, thoughtfully staring into space, stood Kishta Maat, a rare EduCorps torgruta who specialized in studying inter-planetary relationships.

Nuun repressed a sigh. He really had no idea what was going on, but he supposed that he was about to find out as it looked like the Council would finally address them.

"Thank you all for coming today." It took him a moment to realize that neither Master Yoda nor Master Windu had spoken, but Master Koon. That was... unusual.

"We have asked you here to give you an assignment that may dictate the future of the Jedi Order."

What?

"Everyone here has specialized in an area that will be beneficial to this project."

Nuun blinked again and surreptitiously glanced down the line of Force users again. Nope, still not seeing a connection.

"Each of you will be assigned a partner and then a topic to study. You will then research and present your findings in the form of an argument both for and against a change to be made to the base operation of the Jedi Order."

This time, Nuun was sure he wasn't the only one whose eyes had widened, and despite his best effort, his lekku curled for a moment before he managed to release his emotions to the force, which in turn, allowed them to relax. Blast it. But base operations? How base were they talking? Like the *code* base? Was this more or less an internal audit of the entire Order? He glanced to either side of him and realized that, yes, those called made much more sense after hearing that. Now if he could only get his mind to wrap itself around the idea.

"We know this is unexpected, and we do not expect a lot to change, but some things have been brought to our attention and we cannot continue without examining these issues. Each pair will be looking at the history of the Order and why each policy came into being, what the social and political climate of the time period was and why such policies had not been implemented before that point. You will then compare that to the current social and political climate and how each

topic benefits or doesn't benefit the Order today. Any other points we as a Council need to consider should be included as well."

Nuun was staring in open shock, just barely keeping his jaw from dropping open at this point. Were they serious? Well, that was a dumb question, this was the Council, but *still*...

"Master Tedrick Slilt, your partner will be Specialist Kishta Maat, and you will be researching the reasons behind the age limit of initiates." The older human and torgruta both stepped forward and received the data pad Master Gallia handed out.

Two by two, they were each called forward and asked to research things Nuun wouldn't have thought the Council would *ever* question. Two were assigned the reason why Masters only took one padawan at a time, and the effect that had on the current Order. Two were assigned to research the Jedi Service Corps and the policy of reassigning children who did not gain the attention of a master by the age of 13 (they were to focus on the reassigning and why people got reassigned, not the reasons behind the age limit, although they could work with Master Slilt and Specialist Naat if they so wished). Two were assigned the Jedi Order in relation to other Force sensitive groups and organizations in the galaxy. Master Nu herself and one of the other oldest, most respected EduCorps leaders, a rodian named Deerokko Ketu (who specialized in the study of wars and the prevention thereof), were assigned the Code itself as well as the 'no attachment' rule. One pair was even given the assignment of researching weaknesses enemies of the Order, both past and present (they specifically mentioned Sith for some reason that Nuun didn't want to think about), could exploit.

Nuun was given Ruoda as a partner and they were assigned to research the Jedi Order's relation to the non-Force-sensitive population in the galaxy. How the two groups interact, what each side expected of the other and how people viewed the Order in the past as compared to now. They also were asked for the possible side effects of the current standings.

Needless to say, he wasn't the only one who walked out of there in a sort of shocked daze.

xXx

Anakin raced down the hall towards Siri's quarters. His mind still hadn't really digested the information he'd just received. He just...

couldn't seem to really wrap his head around this new development. It was shock, he recognized. He had quite literally gone into a mild shock.

He made a token gesture of knocking on Siri's door, sensing to make sure that she was there and alone (both were true, thank the Force), before he stormed inside. The blond woman was pacing nervously back and forth at one end of the apartment. So either she'd heard, or Anakin's emotions were affecting her again.

At the sound of the door opening, she looked over at him and he wasn't sure exactly what expression crossed her face, but eventually she settled on a sort of tired resignation that Anakin thought didn't suit her at all.

"Obi-wan took Ferus Olin as a padawan!" he blurted out as soon as the door closed.

"I heard," she said softly and looked away.

His own gaze lost focus as he, almost frantically, tried to figure this out, mind racing and tuning out the world around him. It didn't help.

"Anakin," he heard her say firmly and looked back at her. "What are you feeling right now?"

That actually snapped him out of the daze and put him into analytical mode, for which he was grateful. It seemed all of the practice he'd had with Girth these last several months (had it really already been almost a year that he'd been going to therapy?) had given him that, at least.

"Shocked," he responded immediately.

Siri snorted and waved her hand through the air. "You're not the only one."

Anakin managed a weak smile for a moment before he felt it vanish, and he went back to analyzing what he felt.

"A little... betrayed, I think."

She came and sat down on the couch, gesturing for Anakin to take a seat as well. "Why?"

Anakin thought hard about that. Why was he feeling betrayed over someone who hadn't really been *part* of his life in this timeline? He'd

known that, gone over it again and again both by himself and with his mind-healers. And yet...

"I... think I always wanted to believe that Obi-wan – our Obi-wan – would have chosen me, even if he hadn't been forced to by Qui-gon's promise." Yes, that definitely felt right. There was more to it, but that was a huge chunk of it. "I guess this proves he wouldn't have." He let out a humorless chuckle. "Maybe that's why I always had issues with Ferus. He really does make a better padawan for Obi-wan than I ever did."

"Stop it," Siri growled. "This is no time for self pity. We've already changed enough in this timeline that comparing this Obi-wan's experiences to our Obi-wan is nothing short of an exercise in futility. Besides, you're immensely different here as well." She sighed and slumped a little on her couch.

"Do you feel anything else?"

Anakin paused. Even after this long, sharing his emotions wasn't... easy. He wasn't sure it ever would be, but it had helped, more than he'd thought it could. A lot more. And he was getting pretty good at it, if he did say so himself.

"Sad... I guess. I mean, part of me still balks at the idea of becoming his padawan again, but part of me – a large part of me – wants what we had back. He told me I was his brother. That he loved me. I was too angry and power-drunk at the time to really believe him then, but... I do now. And now that I do believe it..." He shook his head. "We don't know what we have until it's gone, I suppose. I... just never thought..." He never thought that he and Obi-wan wouldn't eventually be a team. Part of him still held out some kind of hope, but he tried to squash it.

Siri sat forward, speaking in a soft, reassuring voice. "Just because Obi-wan has taken Ferus doesn't mean you can't still be close. You and Obi-wan are still on good terms, and maybe if you become his padawan's friend you can help Ferus be a little less..." she paused, looking for the right word.

"Stuck up?" Anakin asked with a smirk.

The blond shot him a withering glare, but didn't dispute it. Then she took a deep breath and let it out again.

"You know," she said after a moment, her voice soft and nostalgic

again, "before you showed up, he came by to tell me about his new padawan. I asked him why he'd taken Ferus and he told me that mainly he didn't want to see another kid, 'far more talented than' him – his words, not mine – hit the age of 13 and be sent to the Service Corps. Then he said, 'The Force didn't say "no" when I asked.'"

Anakin blinked. He hadn't known that Obi-wan had almost aged out. Obi-wan told him that he and Qui-gon had had a rocky start, but he hadn't realized it had been *that* bad.

Siri shook her head and stood up, heading over to the kitchen area and grabbing some tea cups. "I think he's still having problems dealing with... well, everything. I know it's been almost a year, but he's still hurting. He's also healing. This really is a good development."

Well, Anakin had to concede that point. This Obi-wan was still grieving, and him taking a padawan was actually a very positive step forward that spoke well of his own emotional progress. So why did it sound like Siri was trying to convince herself just as much as she was trying to convince Anakin?

"Also, he told me he's going to learn Soresu, 'so that his padawan will never have to lose his master the way I lost mine'."

They sat in silence for a minute while Anakin digested that. Then he shook his head. "I still think he needed mind-healing just as much as we did. Still do, I guess."

"No argument there," Siri replied. "But he's still being stubborn and won't go see one unless he gets an order from the Council." A charged silence fell as Siri continued to work in the kitchen. Then she stilled and Anakin turned to see her standing there, staring at the water she'd just begun to warm.

"Siri?"

"I also asked him about you," she said softly. "He... looked so shocked when I asked why he'd taken Ferus and not you. The utter surprise on his face... You know how he is. There are times when he's just so open that you can't help but know he's being completely honest. That it hasn't even crossed his mind to lie. With one of *those* expressions, he said that he never really considered it because he thought I was going to take you on once I got knighted."

Anakin blinked. The shock from before returned with a vengeance.

Siri went on. "I didn't think you and I had been spending that much time together, but from what I understand, he isn't the only one who thinks that."

The former Sith looked down as his mind raced. It had to be the lightsaber practice they did more or less every other day. He'd long-since surpassed all of the classes remotely close to his age, and Siri had taken to coming in and teaching him during saber class. It had earned him a few mild glares from some of the other students that he didn't know well. He tried to help out with the class whenever he could, however, so he didn't feel nearly as ostracized as last time. Also, he'd seen a great improvement in his little group of 'friends', as well. Hik'te and Coira were easily the head of the rest of their class, Hale wasn't far behind, Thoran had improved markedly, and even Maelee had risen from her position of last place. He liked to think his tutelage had a lot to do with it.

He and Siri had also benefited from the arrangement and had seen obvious improvements. In all honesty, Anakin still felt frustrated by his lack of saber ability, but found himself pleased with his progress. It was a... new state of being for him. He wasn't used to feeling pleased about anything he did unless other people praised or acknowledged him. But he'd begun to learn that he needed to compare himself to himself, not to others (and not to his future self either). As long as he was better today than he was yesterday, then it was an accomplishment he could be proud of. It was still a... strange idea to him, but one he was getting used to. Sort of. He still hated to duel a master or even advanced knights as they tended to wipe the floor with him even now, but it was something he was slowly learning to accept. He had value no matter what he did, and as long as he progressed, that was enough.

There were still days he didn't believe that though. He wondered if that would ever change, if the bad times would just slowly disappear as more days where he believed the healthier train of thought crowded out the days where he reverted to his initial slave mentality. He hoped so.

Siri cleared her throat, drawing Anakin out of his musings. Then she spoke. "The Council says they will send me through the trials, traditionally this time. Someone else must have gotten the under-cover mission to take out Krayn. I guess I was considered too emotionally unstable." She snorted again, some of her old humor coming back. A little coma and only two months of questioning my reality, and they thought I would be too compromised."

She still sounded a bit off. He supposed he could understand that... and relate.

The former Sith cocked his head, a little worried. "Are you upset you didn't get the mission?"

She sighed. "No, not really. I hated and always felt guilty about what I had to do under that man. I still have to constantly release my guilt and anger from that time to the Force, although it's gotten much better lately."

Anakin's eyes widened. Right. As an undercover agent, she would have more or less had to completely subject herself to the slaver she'd been investigating. She'd become little better than a slave herself, in all actuality. He hadn't realized before that she understood where Anakin was coming from, albeit to a much lesser degree. She'd also had a noble, idealistic cause behind her actions, but still.

"I... took Ferus as a padawan fairly soon after my original Knighting," she continued. "I'm having a difficult time picturing my future without him there."

The former Sith nodded. He could relate.

"You're a Jedi. You'll figure it out," he muttered, trying to be more supportive. It had been yet another thing he and his mind-healers had been working on. According to them, when you focus on helping other people through their problems, you often find a way through your own. He wasn't quite sure he believed that as thoroughly as they insisted upon it, but even their small suggestions had really been helping him, so he'd begun to get into the habit. Besides, he'd always liked helping others – well, when he hadn't been completely subservient to the dark side.

"Ferus and Obi-wan will make a good team," he said a little louder, still trying not to feel hurt about that. He hadn't realized just how much his relationship with Obi-wan meant to him, baggage or not. Without the idea of Obi-wan there he felt kind of... lost. As much as he hated to admit it.

Siri hummed thoughtfully. "Yes, they will."

He could sense sadness and loss from her too. She wasn't hiding it from him or herself like she'd tended to after they'd first come back, and that had to be a positive development. She continued to let the tea steep and came back into the room, taking her previous seat.

"I... think Ferus was protecting Leia," Anakin said, thinking over his later encounters with the man. "In the future, I mean. Well, the *other* future."

"What?" his blond companion asked, surprised. "What makes you think that?"

Anakin returned her bewilderment. "You... don't remember?"

She frowned. "Remember what?"

A sick feeling started climbing up his esophagus. He felt his fists clench and tried to control the apprehension rising within him. "How he died," he said slowly.

Silence fell as Siri wracked her memory for that.

"No... I don't."

Trying not to make it look abrupt, Anakin rose. "I see. Well, we'll have to discuss that at a different time. I must be going to class."

It was a blatant lie. He didn't have class for another hour at least. But they'd just gotten to a point where they were amiable, friends even. He didn't want to have what they'd tentatively built torn down, and he *really* didn't want to see the defensive, distrusting Siri from a year ago return.

Too bad he'd never been diplomatic. Even he almost winced at the obviousness of his words as soon as they'd come out of his mouth.

"You killed him, didn't you." Anakin froze. After a very pregnant pause in which Anakin didn't move, Siri continued, "I know he survived Order 66 because he wasn't a Jedi. I know he almost went dark... because he hated you. He... knew, didn't he?"

Anakin closed his eyes and took a deep breath, releasing his fear to the Force, and then he sat back down as calmly as he could. "Yes. To this day I am not entirely sure *how* he figured it out, but he did. I suspect he had some connection with Obi-wan, but I never found the proof. Perhaps he simply joined the rebellion, but he'd disappeared beforehand. For years. I think I always knew he wasn't dead, but when he confronted me... " He let out a slow breath. "It was a distraction. I know the Princess... Leia, was there, but his efforts let her escape me. I am grateful now, as I may not have let her live had she fallen into my custody at that point." Had that been before or after he'd found out

about Luke? He couldn't remember.

That blasted heavy silence returned as he awaited her verdict on his actions.

"I would be lying if I said that didn't upset me," she said finally. "But, I don't feel surprised, so I think I already knew." Either that, or she just wasn't shocked that, as a Sith, he'd killed someone very dear to her. It had been something he'd done to people on a fairly regular basis during that period of his life.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry," Anakin muttered, amazed at how easily he could say that now. Say it and mean it, too.

Siri closed her eyes and took a deep breath, obviously releasing her emotions to the Force. "I know you are, Anakin. I haven't doubted that for a while now."

The admission warmed his heart, and he couldn't help but feel as if a weight had lifted off his chest at her words. "Thank you," he said softly, but sincerely.

The quiet that followed felt more companionable than anything as she went back into the kitchen and fetched the tea.

"So," he ventured hesitantly as his mind went over their conversation. "Are you planning on taking me as a padawan?"

She sighed as she walked back into the room and put a cup down in front of him. Milk, no sugar, no cream, just as he liked it. Maybe they really had been spending too much time together.

"I don't know. I guess that would depend on whether it would help our plans or not. I mean, it isn't like you need me trying to teach you or anything."

"True," Anakin conceded easily. He thought about that for a moment, then shook his head. "No, not right now," he said. "It could disrupt a few too many plans we've already put in place." Such as the Ambassador program. That entire situation had surprised them greatly as Palpatine hadn't taken any of the Jedi children as an aid. Somehow, Anakin couldn't help but think that this had something to do with Dooku's acceptance of Sidious' offer. That might also explain why the program had changed from one month stints to three month stints regarding how each initiate and they didn't work in pairs. Sidious wasn't trying to go through every child as quickly as possible to find

an ideal candidate anymore.

Still, their third 'shuffling', as they'd begun to call the process of changing padawans and the senators they aided, would be happening soon, and it seemed Palpatine might actually ask for someone this time.

Surprisingly, his time at the Senate hadn't been much of a strain on his, or any of the other Initiates' schedules. They were, for all intents and purposes, glorified gophers for a few hours a week. Truthfully, Anakin wasn't too upset about that. The job didn't have a whole lot of responsibility attached to it and many often forgot that the initiates were even there. He'd still managed to catch and point out a few things when the senators and their aides had been researching, but had come across nothing of note – well, to him.

His first assignment had been to Hisket Borra, a torgruta from a colony world in the mid-rim. His second had been, surprisingly enough, to Bail Antilles of Alderaan.

He was pretty sure he'd been able to hide the awkwardness he'd felt in that assignment for the first few weeks. That man's child had adopted Anakin's daughter. Anakin had held said daughter back while their planet was destroyed. Antilles had initially supported Padmé's vote of no confidence in the other timeline and was a pretty staunch supporter of Palpatine now – The Chancellor who wore the mask of a saint.

Anakin had little doubt that Antilles was a good person. He was also a good politician and thus, Anakin couldn't help but be wary of him, even if they had parted on good terms.

His third appointment had been to that of Je'crie'mo from a Mid Rim planet called Parthor. He didn't remember anything about the senator or the planet when he'd initially heard of them and that hadn't changed much. In honesty, they seemed like fence-sitters: people who didn't choose a side until one obviously won. Needless to say, Anakin hadn't been impressed, but they had still been average people whom he hadn't had issues being around.

All in all, the whole program had been one pleasant surprise, more of a break than anything, really.

Somehow, though, he knew this was the calm before the storm. Eventually, he would have to face Palpatine. Xio, Girth and Siri were all still against it, but Anakin was adamant. If anyone had to face the

Sith Lord, he would not let it be an inexperienced initiate.

"We may not have much of a choice if it takes too much longer to get any blackmail on Palpatine," Siri muttered, and Anakin had to backtrack. It took him a moment to realize that she was still stuck on the idea of him becoming a padawan. Right.

He considered her words and nodded. "True, but we have two years until I age out."

Siri didn't speak for several seconds, studying him again, an almost proud expression on her face.

"What?" Anakin asked, puzzled.

"The way you said that," she replied. "No fear – no negativity at all, really. You're just stating a fact. You sound like you truly don't care either way."

The younger Jedi considered that for a moment. "I don't," he finally replied. "I only care about taking out Palpatine. That's all that really matters at this point."

This time, Siri frowned.

He raised an eyebrow in question.

"Your future matters too, Anakin."

For several seconds, neither one of them spoke as Anakin considered that, even more confused. Why would his future matter? Except as it correlated to the universe and the survival thereof. It wasn't like he deserved a good future. Not after everything he'd done.

He'd told her that before, though, and simply couldn't fathom why she'd disagree. She said she'd forgiven him, but that didn't mean he'd made up for his past. He wasn't sure he ever could.

Sensing the old argument, and obviously not up to the challenge, Siri sighed. "We'll discuss it later."

"Very well," he replied, thankfully letting the matter drop.

"Anything from Dooku?" she asked, before continuing to sip her tea.

Anakin sighed and shook his head. He had gotten a few updates from the Count but nothing really concrete. Not that he'd expected

otherwise. Apparently, neither had Siri. They'd told Yoda about him and their suspicions. The Grandmaster hadn't been happy about the whole thing, his ears had drooped further and further the more Anakin and Siri had told him. After they'd finished, he thanked them for their efforts on his padawan's behalf before shuffling sadly away. If only for the old troll's sake, he found himself holding out hope that Dooku was actually resisting, even if he knew better.

She sighed sadly and shook her head. "What about Fett?"

The former Sith felt his mouth thin. "I actually have heard from him recently. He wants to meet me."

Siri raised her eyebrows. "He what?"

"He wishes to meet me. I've already set up a time and place." He forced himself to speak as if he were stating a fact, hiding how uneasy the circumstances made him. He'd hadn't received confirmation regarding his updated slave list that he sent the man several months ago, although he'd reported mission success at least once a month, if not more, requesting new drop-off points and his payments.

When Anakin had sent it a second time with an explanation that he'd received word that these slaves were either already freed or dead, Fett had responded with an affirmative. Everything should be going fine now, so why would the bounty hunter want to meet up with him? Especially with how he'd worded the missive...

Fett wasn't happy with him, and Anakin didn't know why, but he felt he had to meet the man, if only to try and talk him down from turning any information about him over to Palpatine. Anakin had looked up the bounty on his head, and it wasn't insignificant.

"You shouldn't, then," Siri said, nervously. "He might try something."

Anakin shook his head again. "If I don't, he *will* try something. I worked with Boba Fett a lot under the Empire. Jango is old Mandalore and follows that code, albeit loosely, but he's still fairly predictable."

Siri snorted. "Of course he's predictable. He'll put a blaster to your head the moment your back is turned."

"While I can see why you would think that, I can guarantee you, he won't. At least not until we've spoken." The moment they finished their conversation, all bets could be off, but as long as Anakin went in knowing that, he didn't have a problem with it.

"Do you want backup?" Siri asked.

Anakin thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "That could be useful."

The woman sighed. "I'll make plans for it. When are you meeting him?"

"Three days from now, in the evening." It was the weekend day and thus, Anakin didn't have any classes.

Siri frowned. "I should be able to get out of previous engagements." She continued to think on that before nodding. "Yes, I'll be there. Meet you here at..." She faded off, shooting him an expectant look.

"Seventeen hundred hours. That will give us enough time to make a plan, don our disguises, and get into place."

"He'll have the same idea."

"Undoubtedly."

Siri rubbed the bridge of her nose and took a deep breath. "You still haven't told Master Yoda about this, have you."

Anakin shook his head, looking (and feeling) completely unrepentant. Actually, he'd only told Siri because she'd somehow managed to catch him sneaking out to race and insisted she at least tell him of his more shadow-based activities. Once she had realized she wouldn't be able to talk Anakin out of his personal crusade, she'd agreed to keep it a secret as long as she could accompany him and back him up when he needed it. Bleersh hadn't been too happy when he'd initially shown up with Siri in tow. He'd been convinced she'd turn them all in. But after a few times, he'd warmed up to her (as much as the bookie ever really could) and was even grateful for the extra protection she provided. He'd insisted that they never bring their lightsabers out – ever – but had been happy enough to provide them with some rather... illegal firearms and then encouraged them to protect themselves and him. She'd even agreed to race for Anakin when he couldn't make it.

All in all, she was very supportive. It was... weird.

"I still think you should tell him."

Right. Master Yoda. Anakin really needed to work on staying focused. It was harder, as of late, and he suspected more physical development

of his childish brain. He knew such changes were positive and would help him in the future, but that didn't stop it from being frustrating now.

"No," Anakin said, voice firm. "It doesn't matter whether he knows about Fett or not, as I refuse to quit my quest to release slaves. I would prefer to not have to explain myself again. It is as simple as that."

"I think he already knows."

The former Sith blinked. "He... does?"

Siri nodded.

And just how did he know? Anakin gazed at her suspiciously, but she held her hands up and shook her head in the universal gesture of 'not me'. She seemed sincere enough that he accepted it and shrugged. "Then it is doubly as pointless to tell him anything."

She sighed.

"Are you still going on the Gathering next week?" she asked, changing the subject again as they'd agreed to disagree on the previous one.

"I do plan on it. Will you be covering for me in the racing circuit?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly.

He glanced at her and smiled. She didn't want to, but she was still supporting him. "Thank you."

She returned the smile, albeit a bit wryly.

"What about Ahsoka? Have you visited her recently?"

Anakin frowned. "I have had... little time."

Siri raised one unimpressed eyebrow.

After a few seconds, Anakin sighed. "Very well, I will visit her tonight."

"Good," Siri replied with a nod of her head and a smile. "And how is your friend doing? The one who's training under Master Xio?"

"Coira?" he paused and raised an eyebrow in Siri's direction. "I realize

it has been a while since we simply talked, but since when did this become a catch-up conversation?"

She rolled her eyes fondly. "Since you needed to get your mind onto something else."

He actually chuckled. "I see. She is doing as well as can be expected. Her life hasn't as changed much as initial padawans lives can. Master Xio doesn't leave the Temple often, but she is enjoying the new courses on mind-healing."

Siri frowned. "I'm hearing a 'but' in there somewhere."

Anakin thought about that for a moment before nodding. "I think she's having trouble adjusting, despite the few changes she has. I am not sure as to why. Truthfully I do not believe she does either."

"That sounds frustrating, but every new padawan/master relationship has a period of discomfort and adjustment."

"True," Anakin conceded, thinking back to his own first few months with Obi-wan and then shuddering. So much for getting his mind off of the situation at hand.

After a moment, he put his cup down and looked over at Siri. "Would you join me for lightsaber practice?" If he really wanted to get his mind off of everything, that would be the best way.

Somehow, she looked like she'd been expecting that. "We've already practiced today."

"Another session won't hurt us."

She laughed. "I guess not. Give me a moment to get my saber and I'll be right there."

xXx

Four days later, Anakin received word: Palpatine had asked for a young Jedi Ambassador. It was official: Anakin would be working under Darth Sidious again.

Chapter End Notes

AN: This does NOT mean that Obi-wan and Anakin are finished!

They still have plenty of bonding coming up! Promise!

Also, expect updates once every few months. I have a lot going on right now, including putting up a new webcomic! It's a gag comic with a bit of a story behind it, and completely free! It's on webtoons under 'discover', look up HACamp (author) and it should be the only one that comes up. I'd appreciate people taking a look at it. Just note, this is my first webcomic. I'm trying to keep the quality up, but yeah...

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somehow, this room had become so comfortable for him. No, that wasn't quite the right word. Pleasant? Happy? Maybe, but not quite. No...

Safe.

Yes, that was the right word.

Well, safer than other parts of Coruscant or even the Temple.

It was a silly thought, now that he examined it. This room was merely a meeting place. And yet, the people he met with here reminded him of his mother. Or at least the feeling of security he got around them reminded him of his mother.

His mother whom he'd been able to talk to not even a month ago. Hearing her go on about how proud she was, and her life and how she was happy, despite remaining on Tatooine, and how much she appreciated everything the Jedi did...

It had been a whirlwind of emotion that he'd had to go through with a fine-toothed comb with both Healer Girth and Master Xio. Actually, this would be the first session that he would come to after his call to his mother where they wouldn't focus specifically on that happenstance.

No, in this session they would talk about how Anakin felt towards his new assignment as Palpatine's Jedi Ambassador.

He wasn't looking forward to it – either the meeting or the assignment.

He sat there with a drink in one hand, unable to really stomach the idea of eating a pastry at this point, clutching the cool duraplast cup as if his life depended on it as he stared out the window. In the distance and off to the side, he could see the Senate building looming over the horizon like a great, mechanical boil.

"Anakin," Girth's voice had Anakin slowly turning to look at him. "Can

you talk about it yet? Are you ready?"

A year ago, Anakin would have dodged the question. Six months ago, he would have said 'yes' without much thought (and then stumbled through something that wasn't even remotely related, utterly confused as to why he couldn't say what he wanted). Now...

"I'm not sure I'll ever be ready," he said honestly, turning his gaze back to the distant Senate building. "I'm kind of numb right now."

"Numb out of choice, or out of necessity?" Girth asked slowly.

Anakin thought about that for a moment. "I'm... not sure."

"We don't have to speak about it if you don't want to."

For several seconds, they remained silent while Anakin mulled that over. He could feel his emotions riling under the calm numb blanket, which was actually probably a good thing overall. It meant he had a modicum of control for now, but could reach those emotions if he really wanted to.

He didn't.

But he knew he had to. And the sooner the better.

That didn't make the prospect any easier.

"I... think I have to," he said finally, voice low. "If I face him as I am right now..."

And there was a spike of fear piercing the numb. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and released it to the Force as best he could. He still wasn't all that great at it. Even worse than he had been the first time around, if he were honest.

"If you think you can do it right now, I'm here to help," Girth assured him. "If not, Master Xio will still see you in a couple of days."

Anakin swallowed. He liked Master Xio. He really did. She'd become one of the few Jedi he felt he could really respect. But he wanted to speak about this with Girth first. For some reason, he trusted the drall more.

"I think I'm scared," he whispered.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Girth nod. "Understandable."

"No..." Anakin's voice went even softer. "I'm *terrified*." He still hated admitting that, but knew it was necessary right now if he wanted to begin to untangle the knot of pain and negativity his emotions had become.

"Of what, Anakin?"

The former Sith blinked and turned to look at Girth with a puzzled expression. "I would have thought that was obvious."

Girth shook his head. "You mistake my meaning. Let me rephrase that. Why are you scared Anakin? What about seeing that man again scares you? What are you afraid will happen?"

Oh, he was looking for specifics.

Anakin opened his mouth to respond but nothing came out. His chest felt tight and it was taking conscious effort to keep his breathing even... or going. Sometimes he really did miss the ventilator that would do it for him.

After several seconds, he managed to get something out. "I'm... afraid he'll..." he swallowed. "I'm afraid he'll turn me again."

"Anakin, turning is your choice. It always was, and it always will be. He just lied to you to validate your decision."

"I know that," Anakin responded, his voice raspy and eyes still stuck on that building on the horizon. "I know that and yet..." He finally turned and locked Girth's gaze. "You've never seen what that man can do. How he gets inside you with the smallest word. How he takes your barest thought and makes it a maelstrom you can't ignore. How he tears down every truth you've ever held yourself to and leaves you in tatters, then builds you back up as he needs you without you ever realizing. I'm not stupid by any means... but I am... volatile at times, and I am nowhere near as intelligent as he is, or as experienced – even now."

Girth cocked his head to one side. "So you are afraid that he will take the truths we have built and tear them down?"

Anakin blinked and nodded. "Partly."

"And the other part?"

This time, the 11-year-old swallowed. "I'm not... healthy yet. I can see

that now. I'm not sure I'll ever have a freeborn mind set."

"As long as you're aware of it, it's something we can work with, though," Girth said slowly, looking troubled.

Anakin nodded. "Indeed. I... I can acknowledge that I have made strides forward, even if it doesn't feel like it. But it's not *enough.* He'll be able to take advantage of me as I am. Root out old problems I haven't been able to address yet... and somehow make his words seem so *true*. He can make things that you don't even *know* are problems seem like impassable obstacles."

Girth was quiet for several seconds.

"How sad," he finally muttered.

The human boy blinked. "Excuse me?"

Girth followed Anakin's previous gaze, even though the Senate building wasn't visible from where he sat. "He could use that for so much good."

Anakin's first thought was to snort. His second thought was a realization at just how right Girth was. It kind of hurt to realize just how much good Palpatine could do with his skill set. Hadn't he proved that by even just putting on the mask of a kind, caring senator?

"Perhaps," he agreed quietly. "But unless there is something in it for him, he never will."

Girth sighed. "Anakin your fears are not completely unfounded. It's okay to feel it, and I'm proud of you for acknowledging it. It shows how far you've truly come. But even with the contingency plans we have in place, we'll have to be extremely careful until we get the proof necessary to make a case against him."

Proof that they were still sorely lacking. Blast Palpatine and his kriffing ability to cover his tracks.

"That's one reason why I can't back out of this. I might be able to get the proof we need."

Suddenly Girth was standing in front of him, holding the arms of Anakin's chair so as not to touch him but still managing to ground him. Always the professional. And yet he still made these sessions so personal too.

"Anakin, you can back out of this. We can find another way. Have a master take you as a padawan, even if just for show, or even just tell him you got sick. With one person, it won't be that difficult to convince him. He might be suspicious, but he can't get in here. You are safe from him here, even if just for now.

"The only person who thinks this is necessary right now is you, Anakin. I reiterate, we can find another way."

"What other way?" Anakin asked back, a little heatedly. "Some other, random initiate goes in there and gets themselves emotionally destroyed in my place?"

"We'll set up mind-healing sessions for them too. I would personally oversee it."

"And what about the proof?"

Girth let out another sigh. "Again, there are ways, Anakin, and Master Yoda says he is open to them. He is going along with this only because you insisted. None of us like this, Anakin. *None* of us! We would all rather see you safe."

Anakin frowned, feeling his heart sink. "Yeah, so the universe doesn't have to worry about Darth Vader again."

The drall frowned. "Anakin, look at me."

Reluctantly, the boy did so, seeing the fuzzy face with the different shades of brown all mixing into a soft chocolate and those round eyes that still managed to focus on him, despite being close to the sides of his head. The face of a race descended from prey. And yet, Girth seemed so strong – so steadfast – in Anakin's eyes.

"Do you honestly think that is the reason I'm doing this? Preventative measures purely to save my own skin? That I don't care for you at all?"

A year ago, Anakin would have said yes – regardless of what he actually thought, too hurt and cynical to really be able to say anything else. He couldn't do so now. Part of him felt relieved while another part of him felt broken and raw. Stupid pride.

"No."

Girth smiled. It didn't show his teeth and felt soft, tender almost,

especially with that twitching nose.

"Good. Anakin, People care for you, and you need to know that. I am one of them. Even if you had no power or sway over the future of the universe at all whatsoever, I would still want to see you happy. Can you believe me?"

Anakin contemplated that before he looked away and nodded. Why did he feel so young right now? Mentally he was older than the drall! Well, about the same age, but still.

Thankfully, Girth decided to go back to their previous line of discussion. "Now let me reiterate, there are other ways to get what we need. We can plan, we can implement, we can hire whoever we need to hire, but we will find a way without you doing this – without you having to confront him. I don't want you feeling trapped or backed into this plan of yours. Please, promise me that you are not doing this because you are sacrificing yourself."

The blond stared at the rodent-like person in front of him for several seconds. Then he looked down as his mind went over that. It took him a few minutes to realize that Girth – as usual – was right. At least partially. Anakin was very much doing this because he saw himself as a viable sacrifice.

"I... can't promise you that," he said slowly.

"Then I'm calling it off," Girth said firmly and he turned to walk over to where his comm sat on the little side table.

"NO!" Anakin yelped, sitting forward and holding out a hand, "You can't!"

"Anakin, I can't let you go into this if you are determined to sacrifice yourself."

"Fine, I won't!"

Girth paused and studied him for several seconds. Then he shook his head. "I can't let you do this. Not in good conscience."

"I have to!"

Again, the drall hesitated as he picked up his comm and turned back to his patient. "Have to what?"

Anakin opened his mouth, then closed it and swallowed, before opening it again. "I have to... face him. I'm terrified and... I hate it. But I want to overcome that. I have to, because fear leads to anger and anger to hate and hate to the dark side. I... I can't keep running and hiding from him."

Girth's frown deepened. "That doesn't mean you're ready now, and that's okay, you know, right?"

Anakin blinked and focused on breathing for a moment before nodding.

"Yes, I know. And maybe I'm not completely ready, but as I said, I don't think I ever will be. If... if I back out of this now, I will always wonder, especially if it works out poorly. I... Perhaps I am being selfish, but I have to do this. I don't think I've ever dreaded anything like I do this, but I don't want that to chase me away from this. Please... don't call it off."

A pregnant silence fell over the room, broken only by the steady sound of air coming through a vent.

Then, finally, Girth sighed and put the comm down.

"I'm doing this because I believe in you, Anakin. But I will only agree to allowing you to do this now if you promise me you will do everything in your power to not make yourself a sacrifice – not your life, not your morals, and not your soul. Are we understood?"

He could think of several instances where he would gladly be the sacrifice. He still didn't want to kill anymore, too afraid that if he did, he would fall back into old habits. And he wouldn't let anyone else go down that path either. If he had to sacrifice himself to stop someone from making the same mistakes he did, then so be it. But... he could go into this with a different mind set. He was the spy, the wild-card, the deep-cover agent... not the lamb (or in this case monster) being led to the slaughter.

He could do that.

Couldn't he?

"That," he finally said with a small smile, "I can promise." He really hoped he wasn't lying.

Girth returned the smile, although it did look a little shaky. Somehow,

Anakin didn't think that either one of them was fooling the other... or themselves.

"Very well." He sighed and left the comm on the table as he returned to his seat and took a sip of tea himself.

Then he took a deep breath. "Where were we? Ah, yes, we were going over your fear of Palpatine, despite your determination to see the confrontation through. So, we've spoken of why you are afraid, but I'd like to go a little further into that."

The former Sith frowned. He didn't like admitting his fear, even now. He'd already said he was terrified. That had been hard enough to say, no matter how justified.

"What do you mean?" he asked hesitantly.

"If you can, tell me how you fear him."

Anakin frowned. "How... I fear?"

Girth smiled. "One way to try and overcome fear is to identify it, not only it's cause but how it affects you. There are many types of fear: physical fear, mental fear, emotional fear, fear we know and understand, fear in ourselves that we don't realize we have and don't understand, ingrained fear, fear that overwhelms and drags down, fear that keeps you alive. Most negative emotions are fueled by fear. IE: One gets angry only because they are hurt or scared. One is arrogant because acting otherwise would irretrievably give away control and possibly acknowledge terrifying ideals that are difficult to face. Does that make sense?"

Anakin thought about it and nodded. This was more familiar territory – another identifying exercise. Girth liked those.

"What would you classify your fear of Palpatine as?"

The former Sith swallowed but thought about it. "Emotional," he paused, "mental, ingrained, but... a fear I understand."

"Are there any of those that you wish to discuss further or give an example of?"

More silence, and then. "No... not today." Despite not having been there long, he felt strung out and tired, like he'd been stretched too thin.

"That's fine, but, now that you've classified your fear, is it as overwhelming as it used to be?"

Anakin blinked.

Now that he mentioned it... "No, I guess not."

Oh, it was still there, a monster waiting to rise up, seize him and drag him under. But he felt more in control of it now, and so it wasn't as debilitating as it had been just minutes before.

Girth smiled again. "Excellent. Do you feel better prepared to face that man?"

Anakin thought about it. He was still scared... *very* scared. And yet...

"Yes," he said. "I do."

"Wonderful. Now, let's discuss what we will do after you come back from each time block you spend with him."

xXx

Somehow, Anakin didn't think that his sessions with D-40 would continue on for much longer. As helpful as the droid had been, now that his mind healers actually knew and understood his situation, it just didn't make sense to keep using the droid. And yet, Anakin still dutifully walked into the small side-room to meet with her.

"Good afternoon, young master."

"D-40," Anakin acknowledged with a nod of his head as he took a seat across from the droid.

She regarded him for a few moments. "You seem to be in some distress regarding the topic you were speaking of with Healer Girth," D-40 said in her matter-of-fact tone, apparently noting Anakin's pale face and the firm stance he tended to take when feeling weak, no doubt. "Perhaps we should speak of something else?"

Anakin nodded tightly. "That would be... preferred."

D-40 returned the nod before cocking her head in a very mechanical imitation of a human. "I believe I know a topic you have not discussed with me yet and I am curious. You have mentioned your time with your former Jedi Master, Obi-wan Kenobi. Perhaps we could speak about him?"

And there went any calm he'd managed to grasp after that session. Anakin scowled and rolled his eyes. Well, so much for calmer. Although it *was* something that had little to do with a certain Sith Lord and it had been something on his mind recently.

"Fine," he said, too tired to really argue. D-40 could be surprisingly stubborn. On that note, he decided to just jump in. "I first met Obi-wan when..."

xXx

It took him two hours to tell the droid about his former master, and even then he left a *lot* out. He just didn't have the time, so he summed up their relationship as best he could. He must have done a decent job, because the droid was silent for a few moments.

"It sounds like you have a complicated past," D-40 said softly, well as softly as a droid could.

Anakin snorted. "I believe that would be classified as an understatement."

"But despite this, you seem... upset that he did not ask you to be his padawan this time."

For several seconds Anakin didn't answer as he thought over the whole convoluted mess that was his former Jedi Master. "I... guess I am," he grudgingly admitted. "I don't *want* to be, though. This is better for both of us."

The droid cocked her head again. "Why do you say that?"

Anakin sighed, slumping in his chair. "Story of my life," he muttered, staring at the beige-colored walls and the single window in the room, not really seeing it or any of Coruscant outside. "He's happier without me – better off, even. Just like everyone else." He thought of Tru Veld, the patient, hopeful padawan who had turned into a cynic after he'd been friends with Anakin. He thought of Darra Thel-Thanis, dead because of his pride. He thought of his children, both raised by other people and both happier because of it. Had he raised them, they would have undoubtedly ended up as angry Sith acolytes if not apprentices themselves. He thought of the Jedi Order in general and the Temple in flames, all within dead or dying – most by his blade. That still haunted him as he strode through the now completely whole halls sometimes, especially when he saw someone he had killed walking by as if nothing was wrong. He thought of Padmé...

"I do not believe that is an accurate statement."

The former Sith blinked, brought out of his spiraling thoughts to look at the shiny droid in front of him. "What?"

"You say everyone in your life is better off without you. What of your mother?"

Well, she had been freed and lived happily with her husband after he'd left, but she'd also been kidnapped and tortured without him there. And she was always so happy to just *see* him.

He couldn't help a small, if watery, smile. "Very well, perhaps not everyone."

For the first time he wondered – really wondered – what his life would have been like if he'd stayed on Tatooine. Would he have even been able to free himself? Would he have become a moisture farmer? Would he have done something about the rampant slavery on the world? He wasn't sure about his first life,but in this life he most definitely would have. Then again, he was already fighting slavery... and weren't the people he'd helped Jango Fett free better off now too? He sincerely hoped so.

Alright, so maybe he was useful to a couple of people. That did manage to lift his spirits ever so slightly.

"And what about you? Are you truly better off without him in your life?"

Anakin stared at the droid for several seconds as he thought on that. The memories of him and Obi-wan fighting in the wars came to mind. It had been harsh and brutal, but Obi-wan... he'd always been there. Perhaps not always in the capacity that Anakin had wanted or needed, but the man had done the best he could. If only Anakin had been able to see it at the time.

"I... don't know," he said truthfully. "It would certainly be less complicated, but... he called me his brother, there at the end. We'd saved each other so many times... and as much as I would have hated to admit it under Palpatine, I don't... want to give that up."

Perhaps he'd taken this whole 'honesty' thing a little far recently... This was getting really difficult.

"I do not understand."

Anakin's brow furrowed in question. D-40 recognized the silent inquiry because she continued.

"Why do you have to give it up?"

"He's not my Master now."

"But he was, according to you."

"He doesn't know that," Anakin replied, shaking his head.

"So tell him. You obviously trust him." That brought Anakin up short. He... trusted Obi-wan? Even after everything? After the man had *left him to die* on Mustafar...? It took him a few minutes to realize that the droid was right. He did still trust Obi-wan.

Somehow it felt like that revelation socked him in the gut.

He trusted Obi-wan. No, the man hadn't been perfect (no matter what Anakin had thought when he was younger) but the older Jedi had always done his absolute best. He'd been a hard worker, always rising to challenges that would have broken other men. Always getting back up to try again when he came across challenges that did break him.

And maybe, if he'd realized that a month ago, he would have agreed. But now...

"I... I don't know if I can tell him," he said quietly. "If I tried, it could come between him and his current padawan. I couldn't do that to him – to them." Because Obi-wan was finally getting over his pain at losing Qui-gon. He was finally moving on – really moving on. He was finally *happy,* or at least getting to a point where he could find happiness.

"I would like you to think about it," the droid said, matter-of-fact voice breaking the moment and Anakin's concentration at once. He wanted to sigh.

"Very well."

"It is well past your evening meal time. You should leave."

Anakin chuckled and shook his head. As terse as always.

"Good night, D-40."

"Good night, Master Anakin."

Chapter End Notes

AN: I DO have plans for some action later on, I promise... but this really needed to be done. The idea of leaving Anakin to Palpatine without any preparation would go against just about everything I've built my psychologists up to be. So you all get another psychology chapter. I'd apologize, but... I'm really not sorry. lol

Let me know what you think!

Thanks again to Khalthar and Carradee for beta reading!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin sat in his Luke Lars disguise at an outdoor cafe table with a drink sitting in front of him. He'd once again arranged to meet Jango Fett outside (his choice, not Anakin's) in a random area of Coruscant about two hours away from the Temple in a relatively quiet open air walkway lined with small businesses.

He felt Siri sitting at a table on the other side of the street, facing away from them and dressed in civilian clothes. She also had a drink sitting in front of her. Unlike Anakin, she was actually sipping hers. He could, in all technicality, drink his, but he honestly wasn't that thirsty. He had also gotten to a point, recently, where did he trust anything outside of the Temple he couldn't see prepared. Actually, he made a mental note to be a little more careful *inside* the Temple... just in case. After all, people had infiltrated before.

Perhaps he was becoming a little too paranoid?

"So, you showed."

Anakin glanced up from the holopad he was reading to see Jango Fett standing there looking very displeased. Politely and calmly, Anakin shut the holopad down and placed it on the table before looking through his mask up at the man again.

"You didn't think I would?"

"A man with any preservation instincts wouldn't have."

Anakin considered that. "Or I just believe that the potential benefits outweigh the risks."

"Then you're a fool."

They paused for a moment, and even though Jango couldn't see it, Anakin raised an eyebrow.

"A fool, you say? Why?"

Jango threw a holopad at Anakin, who caught it deftly and turned it

on. Then his breath caught. On the screen was a picture of his mother. It took him several seconds to calm his raging emotions. Worry, protectiveness, fear, love, sadness...

Actually, he had to reach out with the Force and calm Siri down, let her know that he was alright and that she shouldn't blow her cover just yet. He did all of this without so much as moving a muscle. Not that the mask would have let anything show, but it was nice to know he'd regained some of his control.

"Who is this?" he finally asked, his voice as steady as he could make it.

"Don't lie to me. She was a slave on your initial list. Then you sent me that second list without her name on it and it made me do a double take. I'd already been watching her when I got that, and she definitely wasn't freed or dead. Then, low and behold, a couple of months later, I watched Jedi come and free her."

Anakin could see where this was going and mentally swore. Was this another 'will of the Force' thing because how else would the Jedi have gotten there when Jango was watching her? What were the odds? He wanted to shake his fist at the Force. Just what did it gain by more or less tattling on Anakin to Jango of all people?

Someone somewhere was laughing at him.

"You said you had contacts with the Jedi," Jango continued, accusing. "The way you speak, the way you move... the way you feel. You're a Jedi."

This time, both of Anakin's eyebrows rose. The way he *felt*? Was Jango mildly Force Sensitive? It would... actually make a lot of sense. He checked as subtly as he could but only felt a normal person. Hmm. Perhaps he had some training and could shield? Or perhaps he was normal and was just particularly in tune with his sixth sense and what little Force Presence he had?

"Actually, I haven't decided yet," Anakin responded, once again keeping his voice as even as he could.

That seemed to confuse Jango. "What?"

"Technically I am only a Jedi in training and I haven't decided whether I will continue with the Jedi or not."

"You know the ways of the Jedi, that's enough for me."

Anakin's gaze narrowed and he projected his feelings through the Force. "I also know the ways of the Sith. The Jedi don't have a monopoly on the Force or Force Sensitives."

Jango's brow furrowed. "The Sith are extinct."

At that, Anakin couldn't help it. He actually laughed, quietly but no-less amused for it.

"You're naivety amuses me." When Jango's eyes only narrowed, Anakin decided to elaborate. "You are currently working for them. They are, in all actuality, behind the... order for which you are the template."

Anakin could see Jango's jaw set and figured he really needed to back off instead of encouraging Jango's anger. Stupid Sith instincts. It was the first time he'd been in a severely hostile situation like this for a while and even before Vader, he hadn't exactly been prone to being calm. Provoking other people had more or less become his norm in most hostile situations, and he really needed to stop.

He still didn't think he could hide his amusement when he spoke.

Jango must have caught on, because he didn't deny Anakin's words. Had he suspected, perhaps? Instead, his eyebrows drew together ever so slightly. "You really believe that. So why haven't you told the Jedi?"

For a moment, the two just stared at each other before Anakin shook his masked head. "The Jedi would not believe me and I have only my word to go on."

More silence. Then Jango's frown deepened. "I don't work with Jedi. Or those that study under them."

"And yet, here you are, speaking to me instead of handing me over to Sidious."

The bounty hunter's fists clenched and he straightened, puffing up to appear more threatening. He wasn't wearing his Mandalorian helmet, which would have helped the image, but even if he had been, it wouldn't have worked on Anakin. He knew too much about the Fetts. If anything, his posturing was entertaining. He wondered why he found more or less everything about this man amusing tonight.

"You have been honorable," Jango said with forced calmness. "By Mandalorian law, you are to be given the chance to defend yourself."

Anakin smiled and sat forward. "Indeed. I am not a Jedi and you admit I have stuck to our agreements and been honorable. Technically, I haven't lied to you. I am truly not a Jedi. If you wish to terminate our partnership, then that is your choice, but I cannot allow myself to be turned over to your employer."

Jango's lips parted to show grit teeth. "How can you study under *them*? They are the epitome of hypocrites!"

The former Sith leaned back in his chair to buy himself a few moments and wonder how Obi-wan would handle this. "I know the Jedi are not perfect. If anyone knows that, it's me. They do, however, know a great deal about the Force."

"They *killed* people! They are controlled and led around by the nose and do nothing to stop it! They listen to lies and let people *die*! It goes against everything they preach! They deserve no leeway."

Briefly, Anakin wondered if Jango was simply venting to someone who actually knew most of his story, or if he was trying to convert Anakin to his way of thinking.

Yes, still amusing.

"The Jedi are sentients," the masked man responded with a shrug of his shoulders. "They can only act on what they know. They had the wrong information." He had a feeling the bounty hunter was talking about his biggest run-in with Jedi now.

"They could have verified," Jango insisted.

"They thought they had," Anakin responded.

"That's no excuse."

Something about that line bothered Anakin. Excuse? It almost sounded as if Jango had expected more of them somehow... like he'd been outright and personally *betrayed* by the Jedi.

And then his eyes widened. "You... fell into the same trap I did," he realized aloud.

Jango's frown deepened. "What?"

Anakin shook his head, chuckling mirthlessly. He wasn't amused any longer. "You put the Jedi on a pedestal, as if they were super-beings or

gods. Then a couple of them came in and ruined your life by being normal, fallible sentients." Oh, the irony.

The bounty hunter stayed quiet as he studied Anakin, his face blank.

So the former Sith decided to alleviate his obvious confusion and wariness.

"I used to be a slave. The Jedi freed me, supposedly. But their rules were so strict I felt I'd traded one form of slavery for another." He snorted softly, shaking his head. "My mother was killed, the woman I loved as well, my children estranged... all because one Jedi persuaded me to come with them. Let's just say, they didn't live up to my expectations."

Again, Jango's eyes narrowed. "Then why do you continue to study with them?"

Anakin scoffed. The sound somehow made it through his vocoder. "I didn't have the experience or presence of mind at the time to realize the significance of differences between slavery and the Jedi way that I did notice, nor did I realize that the prison I perceived was of my own making."

What a fool he'd been.

"I blamed them for everything, but I came to realize that I did so to alleviate my own guilt. The Jedi need reform, yes. They are not the perfect Order that society would have us believe and something needs to change. But everything that happened to me was because of my own choices and thus they are my own responsibility. I, too, was angry at myself for building them up and then discovering they were merely average sentients, albeit sentients with super powers, but still..."

"The difference between you and me is that nothing was my fault," Jango practically spat.

Anakin just looked at him for several moments before cocking his head. "And yet you blame yourself, even more so than you do the Jedi."

More silence, which was confirmation enough. So he'd been right. Perhaps that is why he'd liked the Fetts so much – they reminded him of himself, except more honorable.

"I don't work with Jedi," Jango finally reiterated.

And truthfully, Anakin could respect that. "Then I will inform you of my decision. Until then, if you wish to put this on hold, I will look for someone else to help me."

"Why do you defend them?" he asked, and Anakin could hear both the genuine curiosity and the note of desperation in the man's words.

So he answered truthfully. "While I, myself, have a good deal of power, it isn't enough. I want to see the most number of sentients given the ability and opportunity to choose their own fate. I always have. If I have to team up with Jedi to do so, then so be it.

"I also defend them because there are still good people in that order. I want them to change so that instances like yours never happen again. They have the ability and the drive to change the universe. As misguided as they are, they are affecting things the only way they know how. I want to show them another way..."

He didn't realize just how true that statement was until he'd said it aloud.

"You have your work cut out for you then," Jango replied, although he didn't sound nearly so defensive now. That was an improvement at least.

"I do."

More silence as they stared at each other.

Finally, Jango put a hand to the bridge of his nose.

"I need to think on this."

Anakin nodded his head graciously.

Jango gave him one last, searching look before turning and stalking off.

Several minutes later, Siri approached and took Jango's seat. "I'm guessing it went well?"

Anakin shrugged. "As well as can be expected."

The blond's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, he did not attempt to kill, maim or stun me, nor did he attempt to turn me over to Sidious."

Her expression could have sucked water from the air. "The fact that you describe that as your best case scenario with him doesn't exactly instill the most confidence in me."

Anakin just smiled and shrugged again.

xXx

Master Yoda didn't sigh, but it was a close thing.

"We know the boy has had dark training, and we know the Sith have risen again!" Master Mundi insisted. Next to him, Master Tiin nodded in agreement.

"Do we?" Oppo Rancisis asked. "We merely have the body of an obvious dark-sider, but very little proof that he was, indeed, a Sith."

Yoda closed his eyes. The evidence was right there, but he'd always found it interesting, in a very sad way, as to what people could convince themselves of. Even wise, caring people like Master Rancisis.

"We cannot take that chance!" Master Mundi returned, adamant. "It has been nearly two years, and we have yet to really question the boy!"

"We agreed that his mental well-being was more important than an interrogation," Master Rancisis responded.

"Indeed it is," Saesee Tiin said, his voice quiet but steely. "But isn't two years of rather successful mind-healing sufficient healing time?"

"Surely he can withstand a couple of questions about his dark master," Master Mundi agreed.

"If he is the chosen one," Plo Koon spoke up, his voice muffled by the mask on his face, "then wouldn't it be more advantageous for us to have him on the side of light instead of potentially alienating him?"

"How is asking him questions alienating him?" Eeth Koth asked, speaking up for the first time since the topic had come up.

Mace, apparently, had had enough. "Very well. I will consult with his mind-healers and see if they think he is recovered enough to speak of his past. He is going on the next gathering tomorrow. After that, if

Master Xio and Healer Girth agree, we can call him before the Council and finally question him about his dark training."

Neither side looked extremely happy, but everyone could live with this concession, apparently, because the matter dropped and they moved onto the next topic.

Yoda made a mental note to visit Anakin and discuss the potential upcoming confrontation with him and his mind-healers (and very likely, Siri Tachi). They would have to proceed with caution, but it looked like it might be time for Anakin Skywalker to reveal more about his past.

He could only hope the Council wouldn't regret this.

xXx

Anakin sat on one of the window sills of the transport ship taking the next batch of younglings to Ilum, his attention drifting between the stars outside and the rambunctious children as they play-sparred with each other. It felt strange, being physically older than anyone else here next to the senior padawan who had accompanied them. He was used to being mentally older than his peers, but he physically loomed over these children by several centimeters, and he'd been surrounded by them for *hours* now.

Still, he was grateful to be here at all. In the previous timeline, he'd been almost thirteen before Obi-wan had taken him to get his first lightsaber crystal. He'd honestly been expecting to not get a lightsaber this time until he was taken by a master. Then, for some reason (and Anakin suspected the old troll), the Council had decided that all the children of the Young Jedi Ambassador program need to have a lightsaber. Funny how this had come right when Palpatine had signed up for said program.

Anakin glanced down at the comm in his hand and reread the request he'd received again. As soon as he returned, Master Yoda had requested a meeting with him. He would also come in at the end of his next meeting with his mind-healers. The former Sith frowned. Why so suddenly? Was this about Palpatine? Most likely, he concluded, then sighed, shoving the comm into his pocket before turning to look out of the window at the stars again.

He could get lost in that view. The nothingness of Space that he always found so comforting and welcoming.

"We will be landing now," a voice from behind him drew him away from his thoughts, and he turned around to face the senior padawan escort. He was a zabarak named Rahth Mo, resembling Eeth Koth, and while the children he'd been escorting seemed to overwhelm him, he also looked at them with such a warm expression that Anakin couldn't help but like him.

He'd been welcoming and open with Anakin as well, despite his age in comparison to the rest of the children here. All in all, it had been a rather pleasant trip.

So, why did he have a bad feeling about this? Or, more accurately, an anticipatory feeling. Something would happen on the planet. Something personal but significant. He glanced longingly out at the stars again before sighing and standing to follow the line of Jedi children to the front where they would watch the descent to Illum. Apparently it was some kind of tradition.

As much as Anakin liked being in the cockpit, cramming inside an older one with several children while watching someone else pilot was not his idea of a good time. He grit his teeth and counted silently in his mind, doing his best to banish the negative thoughts to the Force while they approached the planet.

He was only marginally successful.

xXx

Anakin had been to Ilum multiple times before. This visit wasn't really very different.

He followed Padawan Mo out of the ship, bracing himself for the cool temperature that Ilum usually sported. The other children weren't so prepared and more than one of them cried out in surprise at the temperature, but none of them faltered.

They made it to the cave easily enough and were instructed to head into the tunnels, trust in the Force, and be back before sunset. The children all rushed in excitedly. Anakin followed at a far more sedate pace. Soon enough, he found himself wandering alone down the dark, natural corridors, following the nudges of the Force.

He felt the vision coming before it actually happened and braced himself as best he could. Not every person, looking for a kyber crystal would get a vision, but it wasn't exactly unheard of either. Anakin had always had a vision each and every time he'd searched for one, so he

wasn't surprised when he felt that familiar twinge in the Force. Nor was he particularly surprised when the cave suddenly became walls. Very nice-looking, expensive walls and rich, if worn, carpet beneath his feet. He knew where he was.

"The Senate?" he asked quietly with a frown. That *did* surprise him. It wasn't a hall he'd actually been in before, he just recognized the motif. His surroundings reminded him of the chambers behind each of the Senate pods. This was different, though. He sat on a chair in the center of a circular platform and only one door led into the room.

Frowning harder, he went to stand, but as he did, the platform rose. He blinked in surprise and looked up. Above him, a circular door opened and he could see the Senate chamber beyond it. Oh. He knew where he was now and glanced over his shoulder as he drew even with the floor above, a little apprehensive. Palpatine should be behind the podium on his left. To his surprise, the entire box where the Chancellor should be stood empty. Anakin frowned and turned back to the enormous chamber.

He could hear people speaking in a low hum and knew each pod held a delegation, but he couldn't make out any details.

Of course not. That wasn't the point of the vision.

Repressing his uneasy feeling, he glanced down at his hands for just a moment and realized that, yes, they were young still. About his current age or perhaps a little older. Then he lifted his head and sat as straight as he could. He calmly reached a hand to his side but found that he didn't have his lightsaber with him, which didn't help him feel any better.

That was when he sensed it. The dark pulse hit him and ran through the room, sending shivers up his spine. Instantly he stood and faced the door across from him – the door they brought people to be tried through. The duroplast opened slowly, ominously and Anakin's mouth went dry. His eyes remained fixed on the figures behind the door as the senate guard, dressed in blue ceremonial armor, walked in solemnly.

Suddenly, the gigantic room seemed entirely too small. The fact that it fell into silence didn't help.

There, in the center of the guard, stood Chancellor Palpatine in his Senate robes, looking as tired and confused as ever. Then he glanced at Anakin, meeting his gaze before the latter could look away. The

smile that grew over the older man's face was pure Sidious. Before Anakin's eyes, the figure of the kind, grandfatherly man melted away to reveal the cunning, cruel Sith underneath. He took a step forward, into the pod that somehow became a bridge across the chamber to where the time-traveler stood.

Unable to rein in his terror, Anakin went to step back, but found he couldn't. Trying not to panic, he looked down and saw, to his horror, black boots that were far too large for him instead of his soft, initiate shoes. They were bulky and clunky and somehow he *knew* they held mechanical feet. He choked back a scream. He couldn't show weakness here. He'd already shown too much.

"Ah, Lord Vader," Palpatine said, voice as smooth as silk drawing Anakin's attention. The Sith took another step, the Senate guard striding forward with him. Could *no one* see this transformation? Why could he still hear talking? Why weren't the guards *doing* something. "Here to testify against me? You should have known better. I taught you better."

Anakin's chest felt tight and he looked around desperately for something he could use to get himself out of this, but he could see nothing.

"No," he heard himself whisper harshly, bending down to try and physically move his feet. Naturally, it didn't help.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw black forms rising, floating in the air and spinning as if they were debris caught in the vacuum of space. Then Palpatine took another step. A couple of the black shapes shot towards Anakin, latching onto his legs and thighs, covering them in dark leather.

He could no longer feel his legs.

"You poor, simple-minded fool," Palpatine spoke, fake pity in his voice.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

He took another step and more black shapes pounded into Anakin. The more black that covered him, the less he could move, as if nothing covered in black was under his control. His panic rose and it took all his will to hold back the scream as his former master continued. "You thought you could defeat me? With just a little future knowledge?"

Anakin tried to ignore him and instead took a deep breath, attempting to calm himself. He'd have to use the Force to...

Except it wouldn't come! It wouldn't' answer him!

"You know very well you cannot hurt me. Not truly. Before was a fluke, a reaction you couldn't possibly replicate. You will not win again."

"Silence," Anakin shot back, still trying to calm the fear and the anger rising in his chest again. "You are not all powerful."

Palpatine cackled. His robe had darkened into a black shade. The guards' armor had gained a purple hue that grew stronger with each step.

"I do not *need* to be all powerful! I only need to outsmart *you*. You and your pathetic Jedi friends." He continued to chuckle. "Which will be all too easy."

"No," Anakin returned, still struggling to free himself from the armor that now surrounded his stomach and hating the panic that he couldn't quite quell. "You won't win again. I won't let you!"

Palpatine took another step and Anakin's left hand became encased in black. His heart skipped several beats. With his right arm, he reached for his lightsaber again and was surprised when a familiar cylinder met his hand. Then his breath froze in his chest when he looked at it. It was Vader's blade. The blade of a Sith.

He could only stare at it in horror and didn't notice Palpatine stepping forward again. The black clamped to his left side. His already pathetic control over his emotions and the Force slipped further.

Desperately, he activated the blade and pointed it at Palpatine. "You will not have me again! You will never own me!"

The other man stepped forward again. Black snapped over Anakin's right hand and he no longer had control over it. He still held the blade, but it fell down to his side no matter how he struggled to raise it.

"It is inevitable." Palpatine's face had gained wrinkles and deformity, draining of color. He now looked like the Emperor in all his terrifying glory. The Senate Guard had been replaced by the Imperial Guard, standing as an escort, all clothed in red. The Senate chamber itself

remained, and yet the future ruler of the galaxy continued to move forward and *no one seemed to care!*

An all too familiar chest plate hurtled at him and Anakin's control snapped.

"NO!" he yelled, reaching out to the Force and not caring which side he called on. To his relief, the Force answered, dark and wild. He drew on the power and pushed with all his might against everything around him. It did no good. The black plate locked into place.

Anakin didn't know what to think or do. He could only watch, paralyzed, as the Emperor continued to stalk towards him.

"You were always meant to be a slave," he practically cackled.

Anakin shook his head, ignoring the tears he could feel pouring down his cheeks. "No! It's not true!" He meant for it to come out strong and sure, but he could only hear a whisper.

"You know it is."

"No..." he whispered desperately.

"At the first sign of trouble, you break. Every time," Palpatine went on, coming to the edge of the platform now, stepping past the red guard. Anakin tried to, but he couldn't deny the truth of the words. Even now the dark side whirled around him and he dared not release it. Just as it had been with Padmé, and at the memory and realization of Leia's identity and before the session he'd planned on confessing to the droid... just how many times had he lost his will, his control?

Was it all inevitable?

Had he fallen too far?

Could he not find redemption?

Somehow he couldn't help but fear that the answer was a resounding 'no'. The world around him began to fade to the blackness of the dark side and he could do nothing about it. Nothing he tried worked. It never would. Why had he dared to believe? Why...

Palpatine stood practically in front of him now, staring into Anakin's eyes. He wanted to break that gaze but a morbid sense of desperation wouldn't let him.

"Now, Lord Vader, you will return to me. Take your place at my side, as you always will."

A great despair rose inside him, swallowing everything else.

He knew how quickly despair could be turned into anger.

He felt himself break just a little more and a sob squeezed itself from his throat. The suit was back, as painful and constricting as ever. No, more so. He only needed the helmet to complete it. It had gotten so hard to breathe...

Sidious, no longer shackled, raised one hand. Anakin wanted to back away, but a deep exhaustion settled over him in wake of the despair. He didn't have the energy to so much as flinch, let alone the motivation to struggle.

Should he just accept the inevitable? It would be easier. Fighting it just exhausted him.

And yet...

"Luke," he whispered, remembering his son. His wonderful, loving, unbreakable son, and he drew on that strength. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"Someone... Help me." He closed his eyes. "Anyone. Help me! Please!" He couldn't make his voice loud enough for anyone but the Emperor to hear, and yet he reached out, desperate. "Please..."

"Pathetic," the Emperor cackled, leaning forward, with a mask held in both hands. "But you will be of use to me."

The helmet descended, along with the blackness and he felt himself slumping, giving in —

And then, a green lightsaber ignited between him and Palpatine, who stepped back with an angry hiss as the helmet flew from his hand. For a moment all Anakin could do was blink. He couldn't let himself hope. Almost not daring to breathe, he turned and saw his son standing there, glaring at the Emperor.

The Force stilled as Anakin just stared in shock.

"L...Luke?"

The boy shot him a bright smile. "Your best may not be good enough,

Father. But you have help. You will always have help if you ask for it."

"Out of my way," Sidious hissed, shooting lightning at Luke, but it was stopped by a blue blade. Anakin turned his head, the only thing he could move at the moment, and saw Obi-wan. His Obi-wan. The old man from the desert whom he had killed, standing there, gaze fixed on Palpatine.

"W-why?" Anakin whispered, his voice cracking.

He got a warm smile from Luke and a sad smile from Obi-wan.

"Fools, you cannot stop this!" Sidious bellowed.

"I hope I'm not too late," Ahsoka – teenaged Ahsoka – jumped down from somewhere, landing between Anakin and Sidious, both lightsabers held in an opening stance.

"We will not allow you to undo all of the good we've helped Anakin with," Master Xio said, somehow stepping out of the shadows with Healer Girth in her wake, the little drall standing firm beside her as his nose twitched irritably.

"You cannot stand in my way! I will destroy you all!" Sidious screamed.

"Hmm. Wrong, you are."

"Master Yoda?" Anakin asked, hating how his tone shook.

And then more people came out, placing themselves between him and Palpatine. Plo Koon, Master Gallia, Master Mundi even.

"Ani," a soft voice at his side sent a shock through him, and he glanced over to see Padmé, his Padmé, standing there, as beautiful as ever as she reached down and took the lightsaber from his hand and turned it off.

"Oh, my boy," another voice and a hand on his cheek.

"M... mom?" he asked. His mom. The older one.

"We will help you, Anakin," Young Obi-wan said, sanding to the side of his older counterpart but facing Anakin instead of Palpatine. "We will always help you if you ask."

"Yeah, Ani!" Hik'te burst forward, throwing his arms around Anakin's

now much larger form. He was followed closely by Coira and then, more subdued, Hale and Maelee and Thoran and Tru and Darra and even Ferus Olin, even if he didn't look like he wanted to be there and... Oh, Force. Were those the children? Those children he could never forget... and yet, they filtered into his view, their gazes never holding any anger or judgment.

"It looks like you aren't alone, and there are a great many people happy to support you," Qui-gon Jinn said, with a smile, walking up behind the children and gazing around at the crowd that had gathered thoughtfully. Then he nodded over to Palpatine. Anakin followed the older Jedi's gaze and found the wrinkled Sith's screams could no longer reach him. The man yelled and cursed and spit and threw lightning and tried to break through an invisible wall to no avail. To his great relief, Anakin couldn't hear a thing the man said.

"Now," a final voice said as Siri stepped into his view. "Let's get that armor off of you."

For the first time in a very long time, Anakin allowed himself to cry.

xXx

When he came to his senses, he knelt on the ground in front of Senior Padawan Mo. The zabarak watched Anakin warily, seeming unsure and very protective – as if seeing Anakin as a threat. Smart Jedi. The younger children all gathered behind him, peeking out at him with a mixture of worry and fear. He felt wetness on his cheeks and wondered if he happened to look as disheveled as he felt.

Padawan Mo cleared his throat. "Well, Initiate Skywalker, you seem to have made it back just in time."

Shocked, Anakin glanced back at the cave opening just as it finished freezing over. Oh. It hadn't seemed like that long... and yet it had seemed like far longer. In his vision it had taken a combined force to get that armor off of him and had taken all too long. Some parts, he feared, would never be truly gone, but they all kept working at it until the vision had faded back to reality.

"Also, we felt a dark presence earlier..." the padawan said slowly, bringing the initiate back to the situation at hand.

Anakin's mouth went dry. "Sorry," he muttered, "I had a...vision."

"Yes, I can see that."

Anakin didn't offer any more explanation, too exhausted to deal with the suspicion right now. Instead he just looked down at his hands where he felt something. Then his eyes widened. There, in his palms, he held three kyber crystals.

They were all purple.

Chapter End Notes

AN: You guys are lucky you're getting this now. I've actually been working on it for a couple of months. Still not entirely happy with the chapter, but I feel it gets the points across that I needed it to.

Thank you to Carradee and Khalthar for beta reading!

Oh, and final Clone Wars Movie ftw! I cannot wait! *super excited*

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin sat on the Gathering Ship, away from the other younglings (who, sadly, seemed to be rather wary of him now) contemplating his crystals. He'd never come out of Ilum with more than two before, and he'd never gotten multiple crystals at once. In all honesty, he had no idea why he'd come out of the caves with them.

And then he had to consider their color. There weren't many Jedi who wielded purple lightsabers, and those who did... Well, it would be a blatant sign to anyone and everyone who saw it that Anakin had dark side training, to a point where it could affect his light side training. Although, in all honesty, he should be glad they weren't any shade of red. The bright red crystals that Sith favored were more often than not synthetic as that particular shade didn't occur in nature but was the default for artificial kyber crystals. However, other shades of red *did* occur in nature. Darker maroons and rubys or reds more on the orange side... Those were rarely picked these days, though. Jedi tended to lean towards the green or blue crystals in the current Order. As much as the purple sabers spoke of his leanings, they also signified a balance.

At this point, and especially after that vision, he was more than thankful that he had any kind of balance in his life.

As much as he appreciated that, it didn't mean he knew what to do with them.

Reaching over, he picked up the largest crystal. It was also the brightest of the lot and the warmest – the closest to red. It also seemed to be the one that resonated with him the most. His mouth thinned to a grim line. Then he reached out with the Force and lifted the other two into the air, bringing them forward to float in front of his gaze. The smallest was the darkest, a deep amethyst so dark it was almost opaque. The last was a royal purple that, while lovely, didn't seem to want to attract attention to itself, and seemed to be the calmest – the most stable – of the bunch.

After a moment, Anakin let the crystal in his hand join the other two and closed his eyes. What was he supposed to do with these? Was he

supposed to make three? Maybe learn Jar'kai and wield two blades? Then have a third for backup?

No, that didn't feel right.

A staff then?

Ugh, that utterly repulsed him. Maul had used a staff and some Jedi Sentinels used pikes similar to staffs... and neither one appealed to Anakin.

Thankfully, he got a rather firm 'no' for that idea as well.

One lightsaber then?

Yes, that felt right.

With three crystals...

Wait...

An idea began to form in his head.

He opened his eyes, blinked for a moment, and then felt the corners of his mouth lift into a smirk as he set the crystals down and went to peruse the lightsaber parts for those that he would need.

xXx

There was a distinct difference between the Jedi holocrons Tai'k Xio had studied and the Sith holocrons she was now studying. Well, there were several differences, but the largest of them was, surprisingly, not the general feel of them. The difference she found the most disconcerting and thus the most noticeable was the near *sentience* she'd found in the Sith holocrons. To be fair, she had to concede there were all types of Jedi holocrons, and some of them had a comparable presence to the Sith holocrons, but without the sheer *intensity*...

Perhaps it was a dark side thing? She didn't know and was wary about trying to find out. She was here to study one thing and one thing only, and getting off track had been where a lot of fallen Jedi had started.

Inwardly, she frowned. No wonder Anakin had warned her against these. Why would anyone willingly study them for fun? Because if she felt she had a choice, she would gladly take leave of this project here and now. If it weren't for the fact that it had already begun to help her understand her patient, and potentially not just Anakin. Her studies

could help her understand dark siders to a far better extent and could also help her understand more about what the Force (both light and dark) really *did* to people.

Well, if she could get some answers, that is.

"*Is that really* all *you want?"* the transparent, red form of an iktotchi female bent down and whispered in her ear. It took all of Tai'k's will to not flinch away. That would only show weakness and it would make getting answers out of this holocron all that more difficult.

Then again, getting answers out of any dark holocron was difficult, especially once they realized she honestly didn't want power or prestige or – as this one kept hinting at – purpose. At least, not *their* purpose.

"Yes," she asked simply. "I am looking at a study of the dark side's affect on the mind of sentients, so I need to know how you thought before you turned and after."

She expected the woman, Darth Cognus, to grow cold, turn away and shun her before retreating into the holocron and refusing to come out again. This Sith wouldn't be the first, and Tai'k had actually approached this particular holocron a couple of times before with similar results. At least the projection of the ancient Sith had actually chosen to speak to her this time. Had even allowed her to ask her question before retreating.

Honestly, it felt like today had been a particularly dull day in the Sith's eyes and so Cognus had finally deigned to grace her with her presence out of sheer boredom. That level of quality for a holocron still blew her mind.

No, she told herself, *focus.*

"*Why do you want to know*?" the dark voice echoed through the study room she'd ensconced herself in.

Tai'k thought about the question for a moment, doing her best to hide her surprise and tapping her lip with her chin. All she could really see of the other woman's face was the lower half of it, and the four tattoos jutting down from her lip sharply. It definitely didn't give off a friendly feeling.

"Several reasons," she replied, nonchalantly. "But I'm mostly just honestly curious about the effects. I believe it actually physically

alters the brain, and I want to know *why*. Especially when the Force itself doesn't have a similar affect." True it could calm people down, but Jedi could be just as volatile as Sith when angry or flustered or even just determined. All without even touching the dark side. So why did the darkness seem to physically twist thoughts when the light side didn't (or at least not to that extreme). And how were the medichlorians involved in all of this? Did the dark side affect them too?

That was her working theory at the moment; that the dark side influences the medichlorians themselves, imbuing a negativity difficult to fight as it worked on a person on their most basal level. She didn't know the exact mechanics, and it was still just a theory for now, but—

"*How boring."*

Tai'k smiled. She had an argument to this one. "Well, knowledge is power."

That caused the Sith to perk up. "*So you* do *seek power.*"

Well, if they put it that way. "Hmm, perhaps so."

Hook.

The iktotchi's grin widened.

Line.

"*Perhaps I can help you after all..."*

Sinker.

Xio hated manipulating anything or anyone like this, but it seemed to be the only language Sith understood. She'd put that observation down too. Now all she needed to do was project an image of what the Sith expected, and voila.

She made a mental note to talk with her fellow mind-healers and probably Mace later on today. He'd have an accurate read on her state of mind. She didn't think it was getting to her, but more than one Jedi had fallen into that trap before, and she *couldn't* allow herself to even come close. Not only would she be letting her patients down, but the kind of damage a former mind-healer could do if corrupted...

It made her want to shudder.

But she didn't. She had a facade to hold up right now.

"*We should start with some Sith precepts."*

Tai'k frowned. "You aren't the first holocron I've studied."

"*Oh? Then tell me what you know."*

The silver-haired woman cocked her head to one side. "This is an information exchange. I'll give you what you want to know, but you have to give me the same consideration. Otherwise I put your holocron back and move on."

The figure smiled. It wasn't friendly. *"Oh, you show promise. Very well, what would you like to know?"*

Tai'k didn't allow herself a triumphant grin. She simply tapped her data pad. "From what you remember, what were you like before you turned?"

xXx

Later that day

Master Xio smiled at Anakin as he sat in the chair across from hers. He returned the smile.

"How are you today, Anakin?"

"As well as can be expected."

She frowned. "Anakin..."

It was funny. Her therapy seemed to have morphed since he'd initially started coming to her. She seemed far more easy-going now than she had initially, and while she was still scarily accurate in her guesses, in most other areas she had changed, somehow – become more welcoming and open while simultaneously seeming just as strict. Also, she seemed to have adopted Girth's opinion on feelings and emotions, or something similar at least. Anakin had to admit, he liked the change.

Usually.

"I am extremely nervous," he said through gritted teeth. He'd already *been* through this with Girth... *multiple times* if he counted more than the current situation. *Why was it* still *so hard?!* "And...

scared." Saying that last one almost physically hurt.

She smiled at him again, a true, warm smile that did a lot to put him more at ease. "Understandable. I might be a little worried if you weren't."

Well that was new. He raised an eyebrow at her. "Aren't most Jedi expected to not feel fear?"

For several seconds she didn't answer, although her lips thinned. She didn't look upset at him though. How interesting.

"We are human, Anakin. Not feeling fear would be tantamount to not feeling anything at all, ever. And while Jedi strive for a mastery of themselves, and then hopefully their fear, that doesn't mean they don't feel fear at all."

Anakin wasn't sure what to say to that. He'd heard the ideal before, but he still wasn't sure he could believe that. Not after how he'd grown up the first time. It just didn't... compute.

"Would you like to talk about it?" The mind healer asked suddenly, probably sensing that Anakin wasn't ready to delve into the deeper realms of his experiences as a former Jedi just yet. "Palpatine and the ensuing situation, I mean."

Although such a blatant dodge was still very unlike her. Unless there was a meaning behind it. Perhaps *she* wasn't ready to discuss Jedi and how they 'should' and 'shouldn't' feel? He wasn't quite sure what to think about that, so he humored her with a heavy sigh.

"It seems to be all anyone in the know wants me to do: Talk about it. Master Yaddle when we met up after my Force Techniques class," which he had been markedly improving in lately, he was glad he'd decided to tell her of the future and his return from it too. "Master Yoda when I met with him after I came back from the Gathering, even Coira and Maelee when they heard. They practically pounced on me the moment I got to class after returning from the Gathering." Which was a rather terrifying thought. Those two were a force to be reckoned with when they somehow got on the same wavelength. Thankfully, that wasn't often.

"What did Master Yoda and Master Yaddle say?" Master Xio asked curiously.

Anakin rolled his eyes. "Other than informing me that I'd very likely

be going before the Council some time in the next few days to tell them more about my 'dark' master?" he was sure she knew about that and that Yoda (and Girth) would be coming in to speak with them at the end of this session so they could address that issue. The way her eyebrow raised ever so slightly let him know he was right, so he answered her question. "They wanted to make sure I wanted to go through with it. Master Yaddle even offered to take me on as a padawan if I wanted to get out of it."

Master Xio raised her eyebrows even higher. "She did? And you didn't accept?"

This time Anakin's smile felt sad and far too old for his youthful face. "It was only to get me out of the program. She wouldn't take me on otherwise. I know she would do her best once committed, but I don't know if that kind of relationship is one I could willingly pledge myself to again. Besides, I volunteered to go through with this. Part of me wants to – wants to prove that I can face him."

"I can see why that would appeal to you, Anakin. But are you *ready* for it?"

He sighed again. "I don't think I ever will be," he replied, echoing his words to Girth.

"We're just worried that you're rushing into this."

At first Anakin bristled a bit, but then he took a deep breath and thought about it. In all honesty, they were completely justified in thinking that, weren't they? He did tend to rush into things without thinking them through, even now. True, he'd tempered the habit a lot, but their thought process was still understandable.

"I... can't say that I'm not," he replied quietly. "But I can say that I am still far more qualified to go in there as opposed to any of the child ambassadors. It is also an opportunity that I would... regret not taking. That I can promise you."

The older woman returned his sigh, but nodded. "Very well, Anakin. I'll reiterate that none of us like this, but it is your choice."

He smiled at her, small but real. "And that means more to me than you know."

They shared a grin for a moment before she tapped on the data pad in front of her.

"Well, I know you don't really want to discuss Palpatine at the moment, but I would very much like to go over your rather complicated relationship with him and we can perhaps pinpoint some things that you can keep in mind during your interactions with him. We can make a basic plan to help strengthen your defense against his manipulations. Would that be okay?"

He wanted to sigh, because he really was sick of all of this... but he could also see her point of view. Besides, anything to bolster his defenses against the Sith Master would be a good thing in his book.

"Very well," he said.

Her smile turned encouraging. "Excellent, Anakin. Now, tell me everything you remember about your relationship with him. Anything you feel you can share. If there is something you can't speak of right now, just let me know and we'll move on, but the more thorough you are, the better."

His lips thinned, but he nodded.

And then started at the beginning, starting with how he met the man and how the 'kindly old senator' had filled the void of his support after Qui-gon died and he'd left his mother. He spoke of how close he and the Chancellor grew, how the former slave came to view the other as a wise man whom he could count on for anything. He spoke of how he could see now how the man's words had poisoned him and his relationship with Obi-wan, with the other Jedi, even with Padmé.

Master Xio asked for clarification here and there and wished to know what kind of wording Palpatine had used, what kinds of ideals he pushed and how they were at odds with his actions. Anakin answered her questions as best he could while trying not give into his anger and bitterness.

Then he told her how things had changed as a Sith. How he'd viewed the man as his master yet again, and yet had still seen him as a friend initially. That had changed rather quickly, though, even if Sidious had still referred to Anakin as 'old friend' for the entirety of his time as a Sith. He'd grown to hate Sidious and everything the man stood for, and yet he'd continued to fight for his master because he still believed in the cause Sidious outwardly pushed, although in reality, he'd long-since abandoned such ideology by that point.

"I was such an idiot," Anakin finally finished, his face in his hands.

"Oh, Anakin," Master Xio said softly. "He built an image for you to see from such a young age, it's not surprising you had difficulties breaking away from it. And you couldn't have prevented it because it's unrealistic at best to expect your nine-year-old self to have seen him for what he was, not with the kind of background you had. You can't blame yourself for something you had no knowledge of."

He snorted but said nothing more. It was his blindness that had caused so much pain. His inability to see the truth that had destroyed so many lives. Master Xio wasn't wrong in the fact that he as a nine-year-old couldn't have possibly seen that... but that didn't stop it from being his fault. His and Palpatine's.

There were so many reasons to hate that man.

There were so many reasons to hate himself.

He decided to skip over voicing the fact of his own guilt because she'd disagree with him and he just didn't want to get into that right now. He jumped, instead, to something he knew she'd agree with him on.

"I can see how he stopped me from ever really being free, now," he whispered. "I thought we were so close, but I know slaves who will protect their masters with their lives. I... I think that's what he was going for; a powerful slave who would do anything to protect him... at least initially. He never wanted me to take over the Sith from him." He just couldn't see Palpatine ever allowing anyone to take over.

"Whatever his goals, I'm glad you can see the consequences to his actions, Anakin."

"I wish he'd never been in my life," he said, hating how raw and exposed and *tired* he felt right now.

Master Xio sighed. "I know you wish you didn't have a past with him, but the truth is you and he had a relationship for far too long for you to just realistically dismiss it. I would be surprised, and a little worried, if you could."

"I killed him, you know," Anakin said, trying to point out that yes, he *could* just dismiss it, thank you very much. He just had to steel himself and be *strong* for once. "In the future."

The Jedi Master's brow furrowed a bit. "And how do you feel about that?"

He should have known better than to say something like that. He blamed his child-like mind again. He was beginning to go through puberty now, after all. And his impulsiveness could easily be attributed to that and the Emotional Regulation Disorder both Master Xio and Healer Girth agreed that he had. It didn't make for a good combination.

Still, what was done was done, and he was tired of running from the consequences of his actions, even if facing them was painful and uncomfortable.

Especially right now.

"I... don't know," he started, trying to concentrate on the knot of emotion involved in what he'd done to his former master. The Jedi healer waited patiently as he organized his thoughts. "I... part of me is proud of what I did... but I still took a life, so part of me is ashamed. Part of me just wanted him to stop hurting Luke and part of me..." Oh, he so did not want to acknowledge this... but his therapists insisted that being completely honest with himself would help him, and they hadn't really steered him wrong before. So he grit his teeth, and said it, "Part of me feels... feels terrible. That part of me still... still saw him as... as a friend," he practically spat the word, "and mentor. How stupid is that?"

Master Xio sighed. "Anakin, what you know," she tapped the side of her head, "and what you feel," she put a hand over her chest, "are two different things. You can know something completely and still not feel it – still wish for it to be different.

"You wanted the person you could trust and turn to back, and that isn't a bad thing."

"Except that he never will come back. He was never truly 'there' to begin with."

"No, but there's nothing wrong in wanting what you thought you had. I'm glad we addressed this, though, because now you can look out for it when you face him again."

Anakin swallowed, but he had to admit that she had a point.

"Part of you will want to trust him again – will very likely feel badly for not trusting him. If you have to put on the facade of trusting him, part of you will probably worry you're giving in and part of you will likely be upset at deceiving him. Part of you may even want to forget

that you know it isn't real. Now that you know, you can prepare yourself and try to identify those parts of you and resist.

"Actually, this leads into something I was planning on getting to today. Your therapy, Anakin has been... well, different than what is recommended for most people with ERD, mainly because we didn't diagnose it until much later into our sessions. Healer Girth and I were speaking and we decided to try something with you if you're up for it. I mentioned before that we were going to try and create a base plan for certain instances that you're likely to run into. That is part of this new therapy."

"Plan?"

She nodded. "Yes. Here, just a moment." She pulled out her comm and opened it.

"You can come in now."

It took Anakin a moment to realize that there were, indeed, two presences on the other side of the door and he mentally kicked himself for not being aware. He also wondered what that said about his mind-set in the therapy sessions.

A moment later, it opened and both occupants of the room turned to see Healer Girth and Master Yoda stepping through the entrance. Right, they still had to figure out what was going to happen with the Jedi Council insisting Anakin tell them about his dark master.

Suddenly, he just wanted this day to be over.

Acknowledging the feeling, he released it to the Force with a sigh.

"Master Yoda. Healer Girth," Master Xio said, standing and bowing respectfully in their direction.

"Master Xio, Anakin," the drall returned with a slight bow of his own.

"Hmm. Good, it is, to see you both."

The two diminutive beings walked over to the couch and hefted themselves onto it. Anakin wondered why they didn't have a shorter couch or chairs to accommodate their smaller statures.

"Thank you both for coming," Master Xio said as she took her own seat again. "We were just discussing creating a plan for specific instances

when Anakin goes to see Palpatine."

"Oh, excellent!" Healer Girth said with a smile. He turned his furry head to Anakin. "Did you come up with anything?"

Anakin shook his head. He rarely took the time to sit down and plan (now that the Emperor didn't *make* him half the time) because no plan survived first contact; especially his plans. Still, the idea of going into the Senate with some clue of what he was doing had already done a lot to calm him down, so he resigned himself to the necessity this time.

"If I can manage to speak to him without giving away how... worried he makes me, I don't believe I will have a problem."

"Hmm. Help there, I can. Go with you, the first time, I will," Master Yoda said. "Although wish to note, I do, that like this arrangement, I do not."

Anakin sighed. "Noted."

The green being nodded and rested his head on his hands atop his gimmer stick, saying nothing more now that he'd spoken his piece.

"But, Anakin, do you honestly think that he won't say something that could take you off guard or make you panic? Or feel cornered?" Master Xio asked, sounding rather concerned herself.

Anakin sighed. "If I do things as I should, I won't panic at all."

She raised an eyebrow in question. "Do you want to take that chance?"

Well, put that way, no... no he didn't.

So maybe looking at this was a good idea. He pushed his uncertainties and weariness aside for now and focused on the conversation.

"So if he takes you off guard or makes you feel panicked, what do you think the best option would be?" Healer Girth asked.

Anakin frowned. "It... would depend on why I was worrying or panicking," he said.

"Well, figuring out why you are panicking would be a good thing, but could you do that in his presence?" Healer Girth asked.

Anakin actually shot him a dry look. "Simply being in his presence

will not prohibit my ability to think." Well, not much. Or at least that particular situation wouldn't be something he hadn't dealt with before. But then, wasn't that part of the problem here?

"Very well," Master Xio said, typing on her data pad again. "We can put that down as step 1: Figure out why you're panicking."

She took his silence as incentive to continue. "If figuring out why you're upset can calm you down enough, you can decide whether to go onto step 2 or not."

"What will step 2 be?"

"Ideally, getting you out of the situation, even if only for a few minutes, so you can calm down," Master Xio stated.

"Indeed," Girth nodded. "If you cannot figure out why you're upset, or figuring it out does little to help you, then find an excuse to leave his presence."

"That will be too obvious," Anakin protested. "He'll become suspicious."

Master Xio conceded the point with a nod, but it was Girth who spoke up.

"Well, we have two options then: find an excuse you can use – you're serving the Chancellor, of course you're going to get nervous and overwhelmed. Something along those lines. Or we can *make* an excuse. We can set it up so that you push a button on your comm and one of your friends or Master Yoda or myself or Master Xio or one of your teachers – *someone* – will call you. We can have them ask after homework, talk about how you forgot to take your 'medicine' today – I know you don't have any, we'd get you some sugar pills or the like to keep up the facade – or you have to leave early due to some complication or other."

The younger Jedi shook his head. "That will only work so many times."

Master Xio nodded, "True. But it will give us something to work with two or three times now. We can brainstorm for new ideas and discuss it at our next session."

"I also recommend a couple of calming techniques that are designed to help you pause and think things through," the drall said, bringing

them back on track. "However, as most of what I usually recommend won't work in this situation, there are a couple of things that can help to ground you. We can focus on your five senses – preferably taste, smell or touch. For instance, is there a fragrance you like? We can get you a small bottle of it and you can spray it."

There were a couple – Padmé's perfumes specifically – but all of those were expensive and would draw attention. Palpatine would wonder why a child from the Jedi Temple had something so unusual and costly.

"I don't think smell will work."

Healer Girth just nodded. "How about taste then?" he asked. "We could get you some gum or a tin of mints. Those are easy to obtain and not difficult or suspicious to have on your person."

And he still loved to be able to taste. That was actually a viable option.

"I like that one better."

"Excellent," Master Xio said while Girth nodded. "And what about touch? Is there something you could rub or hold or squeeze? A stress ball, perhaps?"

"We could also get you a bottle of lotion. Just putting some on your hands can remind you to calm down and we might be able to get a good fragrance for you too."

"I think that might be too much too," Anakin said slowly, "but a stress ball... I mean, Padmé used to have some, but I've never used one."

"Padmé?"

Oh... right. He'd avoided using her name. Kriff. And did Master Yoda know he had a wife? He was pretty sure he'd said something, but Anakin couldn't remember and decided to avoid the situation for now.

"She is... someone I used to know."

He knew he hadn't fooled anyone in the room, but they all seemed willing to let it go for now.

"In any case, a tin of mints and a stress ball you can carry in the pocket of your Jedi robe are some good ideas," Master Xio piped up,

making some more notes.

"What about counting backward from 20 in another language?" Girth asked. "It's a tried and true classic method," he turned to Anakin. "You focus on the numbers as hard as you can. If it's a language you're learning right now, all the better. Because the numbers mean little, it can help you to emotionally and mentally take a step back." He glanced back at master Xio. "Actually, I think that should be step 1."

"I agree," she returned with a nod, then looked over at Anakin. "What do you think?"

"Obi-wan used to tell me to do that when I got angry."

The mind-healers exchanged a glance.

"Did it work?" Master Xio asked.

Anakin shrugged. "I never used it." Well, he had, but rarely. He couldn't ever remember it working, but he couldn't remember it *not* working either, and it had been so long...

"Well, we're focusing specifically on panic or worry, right now, but I don't see why these methods couldn't work for anger in a pinch," Girth commented. Then he met Anakin's gaze again. "If you're willing to try."

It really wasn't difficult to see how distracting himself and trying to take an emotional step back could help him in front of Palpatine, so he nodded. It was better than his method of focusing on his hatred or of how to kill the next Jedi he came across in any case. After all, that was how he'd dealt with Palpatine's presence before. That, or forcing himself to focus on what Palpatine wanted him to focus on and nothing else. That had taken a while to perfect... and it might actually be a plan of action he could still use if necessary.

Alright, so the plan is to go in as calmly as he could and focus on whatever he needed to focus on to keep up his facade. Simple enough and he could work with it if he needed to adjust.

"Let's just walk through it all for now," Master Xio said with a smile. "So, if you find your emotions are getting to be too much to handle, the first thing you do?"

"Count backwards from 20 in a random language, squeeze the stress ball and eat a mint," Anakin answered, glad he'd been able to follow

everything until now. "This will help me take an emotional and mental step back so I can analyze the situation better."

"And step 2?"

"Analyze why I feel what I feel."

"Excellent," Healer Girth grinned. "And step 3?"

"If I can analyze my emotions and it calms me down or I feel I can handle it, carry on. If I can't analyze my emotion or it doesn't help, find a way to get out."

Girth nodded, but also held up his paw. "I want to say that normally, we wouldn't want you to get out of most undesirable situations. It encourages avoidance, and while avoiding your triggers can be positive, there are times where you will have to deal with them and can't just get out. At that point, you need to be able to face them."

"However, most such situations don't involve a Sith Lord bent on ruling the universe who is extremely intelligent and who can possibly read your emotions if not your mind," Master Xio said a bit wryly.

The drall snorted softly. "Indeed." He turned to Anakin again. "It's something to keep in mind in the future. If you're in a situation you would usually rather avoid for emotional reasons, try to use these steps to help yourself get through the situation instead."

Anakin blinked. What kinds of situations could he possibly get into that he couldn't otherwise handle?

"Like what?" he asked.

For the first time in a while, Master Yoda spoke up. "Noticed, I have, that speak of your emotions, you do not. Speak of your shortcomings, you do not, although admit that you have them, you do often."

Master Xio looked like she agreed. "We did kind of have to pry it all out of you."

Anakin thought of his old timeline, when he and Obi-wan would dance around issues they had for weeks or months (sometimes years) before a situation would force them to actually say something about it. Hadn't that been one of the reasons why he'd never told his old master about Padmé? It had all been about saving face and keeping up the illusion that he was... well, the best.

"I... think I see what you mean," he finally said slowly. "And I will... endeavor to not allow such things to happen in the future."

Master Xio smiled. "Thank you, Anakin. Now, we'll give you a comm where you can push a button and it will alert one of us. Whoever can get to you first will be the one to respond. After the first two times, we'll try and figure something else out."

"Hopefully it won't get that far," Anakin said. He still wasn't sure this would be a reliable failsafe, but having a general plan in place did help.

"I hope you know that all of this applies if you're out of Palpatine's vicinity too," Girth pointed out, a soft smile on his face. "Although you'll have more options available to you, and again, we'd prefer if you didn't make a habit out of avoiding difficult things."

The room fell silent for a few moments, each lost in their own thoughts, until Master Xio spoke up. "We should also set up some code words for Anakin to use depending on the severity of the situation. For instance, we could use colors. You describe something white to mean that you're fine or that there isn't actually a problem – you accidentally hit the button or it wasn't as bad as you thought it would be. You mention something blue to indicate that it's something you'll be able to deal with in a few minutes and just need to step out. You mention something yellow to indicate that you might need a break for the day, and something red for us to get you out ASAP."

Obviously Master Xio didn't study codes. But it wasn't like they needed anything elaborate right now, and it was something easy that they could all remember.

"I agree," Girth said with a nod of his head before he turned his beady eyes on Anakin. "But only if you will use that system responsibly. That means being as honest with yourself and with us as you can be. If you press the button and need to get out for a few minutes, no telling us you're fine. You won't trouble us. And it goes just as well in the other direction. If you use the 'red' code once, I think we should reconsider you going back at all. If you use the yellow one several times in a row, that is also a sign that we should reconsider."

"We'll find a way and a reason," Master Xio said to Anakin, stopping him from voicing a protest. "But your mental health comes first here. If you use the red code, that's perfectly fine, but Girth is right. It is likely a sign that you may not be able to go back, for whatever reason.

Obviously it will be a case by case basis, but we will reconsider you returning to his presence if it proves to be too much. And considering your history with him, that would be perfectly understandable."

"And finally," Healer Girth said again, "we need a plan for afterwards. Master Xio and I won't always be available, especially if you come back early. But going off on your own is not a good idea."

"Yes, that will be strictly forbidden," Master Xio agreed. "If Healer Girth or myself aren't available, seek out Master Yoda, or Siri, or one of your friends. Find a way to not be alone. That is very important."

Anakin cocked his head, confused. "Why?" Couldn't he just go off and train? That was how he'd dealt with things up until this point.

"Because after being with someone like him, who can twist your words and thoughts and ideas, it's important to counteract that as quickly as possible," Healer Girth said, his voice almost grave. "If you don't, it can lead to the thoughts and ideas festering, tearing down your morale and building up bad habits. It allows those ideas to take root, which can make them even more difficult to talk about."

Master Xio nodded in agreement. "Yes, we need you to find someone to speak with about these things."

"So preferably someone in the know," Anakin muttered.

"Or to a Master, you could go," Master Yoda said thoughtfully. "As long as speak only, you do, about what the Chancellor told you, hmm?"

"As a last resort," Anakin asked a bit dryly.

Master Yoda nodded.

He could already tell how uncomfortable that would be. But again, the mind-healers hadn't steered him wrong yet.

"Very well," he conceded. "Find someone and talk to them about Palpatine as the last step."

"Even if what you spoke of with him doesn't seem too serious, we still need you to do it," Master Xio insisted.

Anakin wanted to sigh. This just seemed like it would be more work he didn't have time for. But this was Palpatine they were talking

about. He knew how dangerous that man could be. So he nodded again.

"Excellent," Master Xio stated, exchanging a relieved smile with Healer Girth.

"I think that concludes everything we needed to talk about regarding that," the drall said with a satisfied nod.

"Now," Master Yoda spoke up again, "speak, we should, of the Council summons."

Anakin didn't groan, but it was a near thing. He already felt emotionally drained. But this had to be done. Story of his life, lately.

"Yes, Master."

xXx

It actually didn't turn out to be so badly, especially seeing as neither Master Xio or Healer Girth thought now was a good time to let Anakin be questioned about Palpatine, for which he was incredibly grateful. Master Xio even said she would personally go before the Council and demand they wait until Anakin was ready.

Right as he was leaving, it really hit him how lucky he was for having two therapists who fit so well with him. Somehow he doubted that everyone got their therapists right on the first try.

Or, perhaps it was the will of the Force instead of luck.

He went to bed smiling that night.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Sorry it might seem a bit rushed, but the chapter was rather long already and next chapter is all about The Meeting *dun dun dun*, so I didn't want to take away from it by putting more therapy stuff in there. I like to keep those to 1 chapter in most cases.

So, apparently some of my amazing readers are people who have actually been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (what I'm calling Emotional Regulation Disorder or ERD in this story) and after consulting them, they suggested to actually map

out plans for situations because it's a very common treatment for borderline personality disorder. If Anakin has pre-thought-out things to do when he begins to panic, it will help him remain calm and actually think things through. At least, that's the idea behind it. We'll see if it actually pans out that way. LOL

Thank you again for your support! It means so much to me! I'm looking to get a book published here soon, so if that works, I'll let people know. :) Probably won't be for a few months at best, but yeah.

Merry Christmas or whatever you celebrate!

–Thanks to my beta readers, Khalthar, BoyTranscending and Carradee!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was back on Tatooine again.

Somehow, he couldn't help but let out a sigh as he dropped to the sand. This was getting tiring.

"So," a voice beside him said. "Tomorrow."

Anakin glanced over at Qui-gon sitting serenely on the sand watching the sunset. He didn't look at Anakin and that in and of itself said quite a lot.

He turned back to look at the sunset himself. "Yeah."

They sat in silence for what felt like an eternity, watching the wind change the dunes in front of them. It didn't seem to touch the two of them, funnily enough.

"I won't ask you if you're alright or if you're sure," Qui-gon finally said. "It won't do either of us any good. But I will ask that if you feel overwhelmed either before or after you get there, that you do not try to stay out of pride. That is a mistake I made all too often."

Anakin felt a jolt of surprise. "You?"

Qui-gon snorted. "When Obi-wan isn't hurting so much, you should ask him about my legendary stubbornness. Tell him you overheard Mace talking about it." His grin was wry, if a little sad, and he still didn't look over at Anakin.

The former Sith thought about that. The Qui-gon he knew had seemed underhanded and determined, but now that the older man mentioned it, Anakin could see hints of the man's stubborn nature. It just hadn't really occurred to him before.

He almost snorted, but instead lowered it to an emphasized 'hm' instead.

Then the mood sobered again.

"I know you tire of hearing people asking you if you're sure you can do this, but they merely worry."

This time, Anakin did snort although it ended up rather dry. "As well they should." He noted that Qui-gon had finally turned to study him, face blank. The former Sith had to stop himself from shrinking back under the scrutiny. "I am well aware of the risks, Qui-gon. I am in far better of a position to understand than most. But I have to do this. I have to prove – if only to myself – that my fear of the past will not rule me." He felt his gaze harden. "I want to put Darth Vader behind me once and for all, and I think... no, I *know* this will help."

Anakin tried once again to squash the voice in the back of his head that whispered questions. *What if you're not ready? Are you willing to risk the future of the Galaxy on this? How selfish and reckless can you be? What if he sees right through you? What if you don't even realize he's changing you?* Again. *Are you sure you'll be able to recognize his manipulations?*

"I can tell that you're questioning yourself," Qui-gon thankfully interrupted that rather destructive line of thinking. "It's understandable that you're worried."

Anakin slumped. "I'd be a fool not to be. He is so good at locating small flaws and working on them until that is all you see, and he does it in a way that still makes him seem benevolent."

"Hmm," Qui-gon said after a moment, contemplative. "Well, would you like me, as a former manipulator, to tell you the two best ways to manipulate one?"

The sands changed. Anakin blinked. That... hadn't been what he'd expected from the other man.

He glanced suspiciously at Qui-gon, curious in spite of himself, then raised an eyebrow deliberately to encourage him to continue.

Qui-gon chuckled and shook his head before once again turning serious. "The first thing you must remember is to choose – create even – your own battlefield by giving him a weakness that isn't a weakness. You say he's good at finding chinks in your mental armor, so place some bait. Make it look as if there is a weakness where there isn't. You will have to put your whole body into the illusion – especially in front of Palpatine. If he is as good as you say he is, then nothing half-hearted will do, but if you can pull it off, it will draw his attention away from your real chinks."

Anakin blinked. That... was brilliant. "Can you give me an example?" he asked slowly. He got the concept, but he always had been a kinetic learner and examples helped.

The dead Jedi nodded and thought for a moment. "Let's take podracing for example. You and I both know that you love it. You have very little negative to associate with it, so it is one of your greatest strengths. Now of course, Palpatine is going to try to find a weakness. He is going to antagonize you and attempt to make you angry or uncertain or even trusting so that you'll slip up and tell him what he wants to know. So, when it's natural to do so, you mention podracing, stating that while you are exceptionally good at it, you don't like doing it because of how dangerous it is or it makes your mother feel. If you can sell it well enough, then he will believe that podracing is a potential weakness of yours, when in fact, it is not. You can present a facade of negative passion about podracing and allow yourself to put effort and energy into maintaining that facade, offering it as a point he can pick at or exploit when in reality, you are in complete control the entire time."

He faded off, contemplating. "Perhaps that isn't the best scenario, but I hope it illustrates my point."

Ah, it did. Not well, but Anakin did feel he grasped the general idea better. "So point out a topic that isn't really an issue with me, but react as if it was. Act."

"Indeed," Qui-gon said, sounding pleased.

"Hmm," Anakin said, tapping his chin thoughtfully. He'd never been particularly good at acting, but perhaps he could look into it?

"The second, and arguably the most important thing you have to remember is to give manipulators what they expect. Show him that you are a Jedi Initiate, with all the flaws and strengths that that implies. It might even be a good idea to model yourself after one of your friends, then just ask yourself what they would do in any given situation that comes up."

That... actually wasn't a bad idea.

"So why are you just telling me this now?" Anakin asked. He would have liked a little time to work through all of this and find ways to help himself implement the suggestions more easily.

"Because this is the first time I've really been able to contact you since

that vision."

Anakin blinked. "On Ilum?"

Qui-gon nodded serenely.

"You were... really there?"

Again he nodded. "And you weren't exactly in the right mind set for me to bring this up then."

Well, Anakin couldn't argue with that. Still, the thought of anyone seeing him like that caused him no little embarrassment.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of," Qui-gon said soothingly.

Anakin didn't answer. Because how we he *not* supposed to be ashamed of that?

The older Jedi seemed to sense that he wouldn't get anywhere with the topic and thankfully dropped it.

"I want you to know, Anakin," he finally said after a couple of silent minutes, "that I will do my best to support you. I can't manifest on the physical plain, not yet, but for that reason he cannot completely stop me from being with you. If it goes sideways, I'll do my best to get you help."

Anakin blinked. Part of him wanted to refuse, to save his pride and say he could do this alone... but most of him knew how that wasn't true. Most of him... couldn't help but be touched.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Qui-gon smile. "You really have come a long way, Anakin."

He didn't know exactly what had brought that on, but he appreciated that too. He just sent a smile at Qui-gon before turning to look at the perpetual sunset. They sat in that comfortable silence until the scene faded away, leaving Anakin to sleep.

xXx

Anakin woke feeling surprisingly refreshed.

Which was good. He'd need all the advantages he could get. His

stomach dropped to his ankles when he realized that in only a few short hours, he would be meeting with one Sheev Palpatine. And suddenly his potential good mood went South. Oh, Force.

The morning felt as if it were crawling by, and yet when he met Yoda on the Temple steps, he wondered where the time had gone. He and Yoda rode a taxi to the Senate building in silence, Anakin trying not to be sick the entire time.

He barely noticed himself stepping out of the taxi and onto the steps of their destination until the taxi drove away. He watched it go before swallowing and looking up at the giant, looming structure. He'd never noticed how sinister of an air it had about it before. Then again, Padmé had been there as well, in most of his memories. That probably had a lot to do with how he perceived the entire place. The fact that she wasn't here now and still had at least 6 years to go before her term as Queen was up so she could be even considered as Senator...

A cough from Yoda brought him out of his thoughts and he turned to look at the ancient master. He looked worried.

"Let's go," Anakin said determinedly and walked through the enormous front doors. He knew where to go, but followed Master Yoda as he shuffled along, watching the people coming and going. He even saw a few people he knew and managed a wave and a smile that he hoped didn't look too forced.

It took forever and a blink of an eye to get to the Chancellor's chamber. Anakin was really beginning to hate that dichotomy. He stood there in front of the door, looking at the muted color of the duraplast but unable to move forward.

Again, it was Master Yoda who spoke up.

"Have to do this, you do not. Reminding you, I am. An excuse, we can still make."

Anakin blinked at his companion and for one very long moment, found himself extremely tempted. Just getting away from all of this sounded so desirable... And yet...

He remembered his words to Qui-gon the night before.

'I want to put Darth Vader behind me once and for all, and...
I *know* this will help.'

"You're wrong," Anakin heard himself say softly. "I do have to do this. For me."

Maybe he was being selfish, but he couldn't live with himself if he got this far and ran away now. Force, he already had a hard time living with himself, and he didn't need to make that any worse.

Yoda seemed to study him for several seconds before his ears drooped ever so slightly and he sighed. Then he lifted his cane and used it to hit the button that would open the door to the waiting room. A human woman with dark hair sitting behind a rich, wooden desk looked up as they walked into the opulent room. Anakin could practically feel the luxury dripping off of every chair, every table, every decoration, every light fixture... even the carpet and wall paint.

Not that Sheev Palpatine would have anything less.

The hawkbats in his stomach turned into a Kaminoan storm, but he kept his face firmly blank and tried to release it all to the Force. Yoda still shot a glance at him before approaching the desk. Anakin followed him, feeling himself tense with every step. When Yoda stopped, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, reached into his pocket and felt the stress ball. He squeezed it while counting in his head in Mando'a.

It helped, surprisingly enough.

A clawed hand on his arm brought him back to the present and he looked up to see Yoda.

"I'm fine," he muttered quietly.

Yoda didn't look convinced, but he didn't call Anakin's bluff. "Then follow me, you should," was all he said as he turned towards the door in the back of the room. He also tipped his head in the direction of the secretary and waved. Anakin followed his lead and sent her the widest smile he could manage. It convinced her, apparently because she grinned back and then turned her attention to her work again.

Anakin squeezed and released his stress ball over and over again as they approached the door, forcing his muscles to relax as he reminded himself that he'd already seen Palpatine in this time period. He'd already faced the guy a couple of times. It wasn't perfect, but a padawan meeting the most politically powerful man in the universe should be a little nervous.

They paused in front of the door again and he glanced over at Yoda, nodding his head as it opened. He saw the figure sitting behind the dark-ebony desk and suddenly, he wasn't in the Senate building, but in the Imperial Palace. The Emperor had turned the Senate into his own residence, allowing the Imperial Senate to meet there and discuss things on his terms.

It had gone through some rather major renovations, though. The dark, spacious throne room extruded an elegant menace, somehow making it both desirable and detestable at the same time. How very like the man who had taken over the Republic, turning it into his very own kingdom, and Anakin – Vader – waited to be acknowledged by the Emperor.

He suddenly found it much easier to clamp down on his feelings, knowing if he didn't then there would be pain, if he were lucky. Above all else, the Emperor liked control the most, and so he punished what he could sense that he didn't like – and what he didn't like depended on his mood as often as it didn't. He could only hope that Palpatine wasn't in a good mood today. As odd as it seemed, those were the most painful days. Blanking his face as he always did – it helped with his emotions, even if no one could see his face – he stood at attention, feeling the familiar form and taking what comfort he could from it. He had to make sure the Emperor couldn't read anything off of him – he couldn't afford the weakness.

"Initiate?"

A blink and he was back in the Senate building. Yoda was watching him with an unreadable expression and Palpatine seemed curious and confused.

He'd been acknowledged, so he walked in, making sure his steps were confident and sure, stopping in front of his desk and bowing. He barely stopped himself from asking what his Master's bidding was.

"Well," Palpatine said, glancing from Anakin to Yoda, who hobbled up beside him, "he certainly seems to know how to make one feel... respected."

"Hmm, breaking him of his old habits, we are," Master Yoda said, almost in passing. Anakin took a deep breath but didn't dare let his hands back in his pockets to reach for that stress ball, let alone the mints. He'd thought he would be able to handle this, but now he realized that he'd forgotten what being in this man's presence was

really like. Even after his two meetings in this timeline, he'd forgotten. If he showed he'd forgotten, Sidious would make sure he didn't forget again. And it would be painful.

"You can be at ease, young man," Palpatine assured him.

Anakin nodded once and took an at ease military position.

"I meant you can sit down," he said, gesturing to one of the seats in front of the desk.

For a moment, that didn't compute. The former Sith glanced down as if seeing the soft, cream-colored chair for the first time. Then he glanced up at Palpatine as if to be sure, then back at the seat, then at Master Yoda before finally lowering himself, slowly and stiffly, into the chair as if it would attack him for doing so.

"I suppose that meeting the Chancellor like this can be a little overwhelming," Palpatine said in an understanding voice that simultaneously made Anakin want to brace himself and relax.

And Anakin had to go through another hour of this... maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

"Hmm, indeed," Yoda agreed, obviously taking his cue from Anakin. He was a much better actor than his fellow Jedi, looking far more at ease in the presence of the Sith Lord. Again, it didn't seem to compute in Anakin's head. How could he just be so *calm* about this whole thing?

Because he had to be to not draw suspicion. Right.

Anakin closed his eyes, reminded himself that he wasn't in the future, Sidious didn't know him or anything about him, they had no history. He counted backwards from 10 in Bothan and forced himself to relax.

When he opened his eyes, he felt a little more like a Jedi Initiate instead of an apprentice Sith Lord. It wasn't much, but he'd take what he could get.

"What is your name, my boy?" Palpatine asked him kindly, setting his current work aside.

Anakin wanted to swallow but didn't dare. He glanced at Yoda again before opening his mouth.

"Anakin Skywalker, sir." The words came out far calmer than he would have imagined they could and he mentally patted his back.

"Excellent. I'm pleased to have both you and Master Yoda here today. Although I will admit, I didn't expect the Grandmaster to come himself."

"Nervous to meet the Chancellor, Initiate Skywalker was. Some time, I could make."

"Ah, yes. Well, now that you're here, I'm not so bad, am I?" he turned back to Anakin with a welcoming, grandfatherly smile. There was no malice in it, and yet it made Anakin's heart sink and his stomach tie into knots. He hoped he wasn't visibly sweating.

"I... suppose not, sir," Anakin said hesitantly, forcing the words out and hating how bitter they tasted on his tongue.

The older man's smile widened and he sat back in his chair. Anakin had to look away. That pose reminded him far too much of how the Emperor preferred to sit.

Oh, this was so much harder than he thought it would be.

They were right. He wasn't ready.

He was right. He'd never be ready.

Kriff.

"Well, why don't you tell me about yourself. I know I've met you before. You were at Naboo, right?"

And he couldn't back down now.

He forced himself to put his hand in his pocket and reach for the stress ball, whether Palpatine could see or not. He wasn't Vader anymore. This wasn't Sidious... well, his Sidious. Ugh. He squeezed the thing as tightly as he could, took a deep breath and nodded. He hoped the smile he gave didn't look too forced.

"I was. I come from an outer rim planet fairly near there," the less information he could give the better, so no names. "Master Qui-gon Jinn and his Padawan, Obi-wan Kenobi, landed there with the Queen and her entourage after escaping the blockade."

"Ah, yes, I remember that. Please continue."

"Master Qui-gon secured my help in obtaining the parts he needed and in turn he freed me—"

"Freed?"

Anakin felt his mouth go dry. He'd said too much... no, wait, he was supposed to tell Palpatine that he was a slave. It would make his strained actions far more explainable. Didn't mean he had to like it.

"Yes, sir," he replied, focusing on keeping his voice steady. "I was a slave."

"That's... terrible! I... didn't know that things like that still happened in the universe. The Republic's laws should counter all of that!"

"It was Hutt territory," the blond boy muttered. That was too much information too. He'd already given Palpatine anything he'd need to track down Anakin's origin. Kriff.

"Your... master must have run you ragged. You speak very well for a child your age, let alone a slave. That's quite the accomplishment."

"He... was very strict," Anakin said, mentally kicking himself. He'd gotten past this months – over a year – ago. He needed to stop talking like the second in command of the Imperial Army and more like the child he currently was.

"You poor child," Palpatine said, just the right amount of worry and sadness injected into his voice.

Anakin had known his former master was good. He hadn't realized just *how* good. Honest-looking smiles weren't supposed to be faked, but each one of Palpatine's looked genuine. Of course, it had been years – decades – since the Sidious he'd known had been required to act or put on a front of any kind, but still, this was another level altogether than he'd been expecting.

And he hated himself for that spark of respect he felt. This was Sidious! The Sith Lord who had brought the universe to its knees and destroyed so many lives! He shouldn't be feeling any respect for him at all!

He squeezed his stress ball harder.

"I... don't need your pity," he managed to get out, allowing the real resentment he felt at the expression to show through. Misdirection.

Give him exactly what he expects. Qui-gon's words rang through his head and his determination hardened.

"Of course not," Palpatine said with a nod of his head. "My apologies."

Lies.

Palpatine wouldn't ever apologize and mean it.

"In any case, please, continue."

"I... was brought to the Jedi Temple."

"Yes, I remember. How old were you?"

"... Nine, My Lord."

The Chancellor waved his hand dismissively, eyes darting to Yoda for the barest moment – if Anakin had blinked, he would have missed it. "Please, just Chancellor will do."

"... Yes, Chancellor."

"You were nine? I was under the impression that that was too old to begin training to become a Jedi."

At that, Anakin looked over at Yoda. Palpatine, thankfully, followed his gaze and Anakin felt himself relax ever so slightly.

"Considering some changes, we are. Spoken about this before, the Council has. An opportunity we saw when presented Initiate Skywalker was."

"Ah, so you might be the first of many new Jedi your age," the Sith-in-disguise said with a thoughtful nod.

"If it goes well, sir," Anakin responded quietly.

"Oh, I'm sure it will. You seem like a bright young lad."

Anakin squeezed his ball again and forced a small smile onto his face. "Thank you, sir." He didn't squeak, but it was a near thing. This wasn't getting easier.

"Well, let me tell you what I expect of you, Initiate Skywalker. I will likely have several errands I need you to run when you're here, and honestly, that will be your main duty. My secretary, Mrs. Meddion*,

may also have errands and the odd chore for you to do. I understand that you've been in the program for a while, so I'm sure that you'll find my office to be just like those you've served in before."

Another swallow. Anakin nodded but didn't trust himself to speak.

"Also," Palpatine went on, "I want you to know that if you have any questions about what's going on, I'd like you to ask me or Mrs. Meddion. If we can tell you, we'll gladly explain."

Anakin nodded again, knowing he had to say something and mentally forced his throat to relax. "Thank you, sir." Well, his response had been passable, at least.

He forced himself to smile again, just a soft, small one, before looking away as if he were embarrassed or overwhelmed, but getting over it.

That's what he would expect, right?

"Excellent. Now, I have some holopads for you to deliver, and then you can report to Mrs. Meddion for anything else. If you forget which place each holopad goes to, you can simply turn it on and it will tell you. This first holopad goes to the Chandrilla delegate. This next one..."

He continued on, and Anakin made sure to memorize each one. Sidious wouldn't expect any less, and despite himself, he couldn't bring himself to dare get something wrong. He wondered if that was his old habits talking or if it were his new fear... or both?

When he was finished, Anakin nodded, stood and bowed before taking the holopads and turning to the door without a word.

"I hope to see you before you leave today, Initiate Skywalker, and thank you for coming Master Yoda."

"Hmm. No trouble, it was. Good day, Chancellor."

Anakin walked steadily out the door and through the lobby, his mind already on the assignments he would have to get done as efficiently as possible. At least he wasn't told to track down a very elusive rebellion and eliminate it this time.

"Initiate Skywalker," a voice called out to him and he paused, noting that Yoda was shuffling along as calmly as ever.

Oh, right.

The door closed behind the old Jedi as he hobbled into the room, nodding politely to Mrs. Meddion before continuing to where Anakin was standing. "At least see me out, you can," the troll admonished.

Anakin took a deep breath and tried for a sheepish smile (although he was pretty sure it just came off as a grimace). "My apologies, Master." He held the door open for the smaller being before following him out and into the hall. Once he pressed the button to have the door close behind them, he almost collapsed, staggering to the side and leaning against the wall.

"Knew this was a bad idea, I did," Yoda said.

Anakin's hands were shaking and he had to sit down. There was a small corner nearby and he put his back into it before dropping to the ground and putting his hands over his head. He hated how weak he must seem, but couldn't bring himself to care enough to actually move or put on a face. He felt like each of his nerves had been rubbed raw, as if his whole body had been wrung out and then set out to dry in the sun on some planet with no actual atmosphere – exposed to the radiation rays and the elements of space.

And he hated it.

He didn't have *time* for this! He had things he had to get done! He knew if he didn't that Palpatine wouldn't punish him now, but that didn't alleviate his fear or his natural instincts.

The noise of rustling fabric by his side had him glancing over at Master Yoda now sitting beside him. Anakin blinked.

"Well, you did," he finally said. "Nervous and wary and tense, you were, but no more than one would have expected. One such as he, even." Anakin read the subtext of the vague statement. *Even to a Force Sensitive.*

"Then why do I feel as if I have just given everything away?" he muttered. He honestly felt like he'd completely and utterly failed. Then again, he usually felt that way after meeting with Palpatine.

Yoda sighed. "See now, do you, why too soon, this was?"

Anakin shut his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves. "But it wouldn't have ever been better," he muttered. "I never

would have been ready."

The old master didn't respond, but Anakin could feel his disapproval, even if he seemed to have conceded for now.

"Do you know the worst part?" he asked softly. "I still want to please him. I still want his praise and his approval. Even knowing..." he thought of where he was and realized there might be listening devices. It was just like Palpatine to bug the entire corridor outside his place. Had his paranoia reached those types of heights yet? "Even knowing what I do," he finally said, hoping that was vague enough.

"Not unexpected, that is."

"But it is unacceptable." He couldn't – shouldn't – think like that! He knew better! He *knew* better!

Yoda sighed again. "Expect too much of yourself, you do."

Anakin couldn't really argue with that. That didn't stop the fact that they didn't really have much of another choice at the moment.

"I have to do this," he finally said. "Even if it destroys me... I have to." That, at least, hadn't changed.

"Hmm," the smaller being replied in a tone that said he didn't agree or disagree. Then, after a moment, he spoke again. "Tell him the truth, you should."

Anakin's head whipped over so fast he almost gave himself whiplash. He couldn't say anything, just staring in a sort of uncomprehending betrayal at the being beside him.

"That remind you of a former master, he does."

They both sat there as the younger boy blinked at the ancient creature next to him. That... that could work. He'll exploit the kriff out of it, but that was something Anakin could plan for, and it would explain his nervousness around the man.

"I... hate the idea of telling him anything remotely true."

Yoda frowned. "Then withdraw you from the program, I will. Too dangerous, this is."

Anakin sighed. "No, that would only make everything worse. I can tell him that. I will tell him. I promise. And I won't leave things out in the

future just because they might be true. I'll... I'll think about what I say and consider... the larger picture before I speak." Even though he hated doing that. Even though he felt that that's what Vader would do and not Anakin. Even though he almost felt as if he were betraying any morals he had.

And Yoda could tell. He could still practically feel the small Master's reluctance, but he hid it behind a very convincing facade.

"Good. Now," Master Yoda used his gimmer stick to lever himself up, "have errands to run, you do. Have a temple to get back to, I do."

Anakin was tempted to ask him to stay... but he knew that would be too suspicious. So he nodded and rose to his own feet. He took a deep breath, released everything he could to the Force and felt it embrace him back. Warm and comforting, it bolstered him more than anything else could.

Even this close to a Sith Lord, the Force – the light – was still there. He glanced at the old Jedi Master beginning to shuffle out into the hallway and reminded himself that he would still have allies and could still call on the light for strength.

He also realized he'd gone face-to-face with Palpatine, had a discussion with him, even, and come out in the most positive position they could expect at this point. They had plans in place, they had contingencies to those plans, and he had the support he needed. He could do this.

For the first time, he actually began to believe that, even if it was only the barest sliver of that belief.

"Honest with me, you should be: Alright will you be?" Yoda asked, looking up at Anakin in concern.

Anakin took another breath and nodded. "Yeah, I will be."

"Hmm," Yoda responded, rubbing his chin a little with his clawed hand. Then he turned and began to shuffle away. "See me out, you can."

A real, if watery smile came to the boy's lips, just for an instant. "Yes, Master Yoda," he said as he caught up.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I'd like to thank Khalthar and Carradee for their fabulous help in beta reading. Luv you guys! Also thank you to everyone who has read this and everyone who has commented!

Sorry this took so long. The next one shouldn't take nearly so long to get up.

*Also, Mrs. Meddion is his secretary. He had a different secretary later on, but this is at the very beginning of his term, so he'd still be kissing up to people.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sheev Palpatine was a paranoid person. He had no problems admitting this as paranoid people tended to stay alive. So, the moment that another strong Sith had made themselves known, he'd rewritten almost all of his plans to include this new development. The following months had been both frustrating and anti-climactic at the same time, but as he'd been too busy focusing on the election and then planning for the future war and setting that up, along with looking for Vader and trying to obtain a new apprentice, well he hadn't had a lot of time to actually look into just *who* Vader could be.

Once Dooku had finally come to his senses (well, somewhat, the man was proving to be rather resilient, even if he was mostly compliant) it had freed up enough time for Palpatine to begin looking through his Master's records and plans. It had taken him a while to track down some of this information, but he wasn't the greatest Sith Master in history for nothing.

In all honesty, he'd expected to find at least a mention of the other Sith, and with the time constraints, it had taken him *months* to go through it all with a fine-toothed comb. He'd found a lot of interesting tid-bits that could definitely come in useful in the future, but – to his consternation – not a single hint of Darth Vader.

That worried him, and he'd been forced to consider the conclusion that Plageus didn't actually *know* about this Vader. But it still didn't sit right with him.

After that, he'd come up with three working theories:

First, his master's success in crafting life from the Force yielded better results than expected. And it would have had to be one of the earlier experiments for Vader to fit the mental image he'd taken from the mind of the assassin who had encountered the Sith. Perhaps his master had actually *succeeded* in influencing the Force to create a birth before he'd taken Palpatine on and their experiments together was him passing the technique on? Or him looking for an even stronger child? A Force Vergence could be taught and harnessed, and Plageus had said he needed Sidious to make one, but what if it had just been a

cover up? Had Plageus already somehow made his masterpiece?

There were more than a few holes in that theory, but it wasn't inconceivable.

Second, the idea that Plageus – Mister Play-By-The-Book himself – had taken on another apprentice, whether that be the vergence he had created (?) or someone else, behind Sidious' back. Likely even before Sidious had come into the picture. That was... a disturbing idea. If that were the case, did the previous apprentice simply not meet standards and so Plageus found Palpatine? Or did that mean that Plageus had intended the first to be the true heir to the Sith and Sidious was the backup? Not that it mattered, Sidious had killed his master, and that made him the true Sith Lord, but what could have been left out of his training were that the case? What was he missing? That thought angered him greatly. He hated going up against someone who had a potential advantage like that.

The last theory, and the one he both liked the least but found the most plausible, was that Vader was somehow an awakened Sith from the past. Either a spirit who had taken a host, or a Sith that was thought to have been killed but who was merely put into a stasis of some kind, only to be recently awakened. It couldn't be a truly ancient Sith, if that were the case, as his tactics tended to fall more in line with Sidious' own, staying hidden and sending out subtle messages as warnings while setting things up in the background. A Sith from before Darth Bane would have likely been far easier to spot and track as they would have amassed a following before making any power play, and likely would not have outed themselves as Vader had. Other than Luke Lars (and the next time he appeared on the radar, Palpatine was going to confront him himself), Palpatine couldn't find a single person who followed this new Sith. Either the followers were that good at hiding – unlikely – or there weren't any. Yes, Vader's tactics seemed to be far more in line with Darth Bane's way of thinking than a truly ancient Sith, so there was that at least.

The biggest problem with each of his theories was that he just couldn't. Find. *Proof*. He could speculate all he wanted, but every one of the theories could be applied at this point and he couldn't, in good conscience, dismiss any one of them. Nor could he fine-tune without more information. There was *nothing* in Plageus' materials to indicate another apprentice *or* any successful vergence. Ultimately, that didn't mean a whole lot as Palpatine *knew* he hadn't found everything his Master had left behind, but there should at least be *something* indicating what was going on.

Which was why he was leaning towards that third option.

Ugh. Either way, as he had predicted, Vader had thrown his entire operation into question and he had to respond in kind. With as little information as he'd found and his Master's possible betrayal, he couldn't afford any more slips. No, what he needed was information and his own followers. He needed acolytes – well, more of them. More competent acolytes that he could pit against Vader. His current acolytes wouldn't do well as much more than guards for his person. They would put up a good show and little more. None of them were remotely apprentice material.

Hence why he was looking forward to meeting his Young Jedi Ambassador. And he would have three months to test where the younglings in the Temple were and just how far he could bend them at this point.

Almost as if his thoughts had summoned them, his secretary informed him that his new ambassador and Master Yoda were here.

Sitting in his office behind his personal desk, he couldn't help but stare at the holocom for a moment, a little taken back. Why would Master Yoda of all people accompany his new ambassador? Unless it was to show respect to the Chancellor. He just hadn't expected the Jedi to care that much at this point. Of course, he was a new Chancellor, and this was his first Jedi Ambassador.

Explainable, but still something he should explore.

A couple of rather long minutes later, Yoda finally shuffled through the door followed by a blank-faced boy with sandy colored hair. He looked awfully familiar... Oh, right. He'd been that boy who had accompanied Jinn and his apprentice on the older Jedi's last journey. He'd also been on Naboo during the 'Battle for Freedom' as the natives had taken to calling it (Palpatine wondered where his own intelligence came from if the general population of Naboo was really that idiotically idealistic). There hadn't been much news on him, though. He'd even spoken to Panaka, but didn't have the man firmly enough under his grasp to really get anything out of him yet. It wouldn't take too much more time, he was sure, but that was for the future, not now, and he still found it frustrating.

No, wait, there had been one rumor about the boy, that something horrible had happened to him while everyone had been trapped in the Throne Room, but no one seemed to know what that 'horrible' thing

was. Palpatine guessed it was some kind of trauma at seeing the Sith Lord. And due to his Force-Sensitivity, he could have retained the memories when the Sith had wiped them from everyone else. After all, no one else had mentioned anything about another figure from that throne room, but the image he'd gotten from the assassin had simply matched what he'd sensed too well to be dismissed – and Palpatine didn't believe in coincidences.

Although that brought another thought to mind that he hadn't quite realized before: Just when had the Sith Lord arrived? Few others had spoken of what had happened in the Throne Room (hence why he'd had to torture it out of his assassin), but where had Vader been hiding? He couldn't figure everything out without more details. Hmm. Something to get out of Panaka later, once he finally won the man over completely.

"Chancellor," Master Yoda said with a nod of respect. "Good it is to meet you."

"And you as well, Master Yoda. I've heard so many things about you." He had to stand and bow for decorum. That didn't mean he had to like it. He hoarded the anger he drew from it though. Master Yoda shuffled forward. The boy didn't, standing in the doorway rigidly. Palpatine frowned.

"Initiate?" he asked. The boy blinked as if coming out of his thoughts (or a vision? But there hadn't been any indication with the Force? He'd have to think on that).

A couple of seconds later, the boy walked confidently forward, his steps long and firm as he strode in, made a sharp turn as if he'd been in the military, and then (much to Sidious' pleasure) he bowed. He never said a word, simply waiting to be acknowledged.

This was such un-Jedi-like behavior that Palpatine wasn't exactly sure what to do with this... yet. He'd figure it out soon enough.

"Well," Palpatine said as he turned his gaze to Yoda, who hobbled up beside the boy, "he certainly seems to know how to make one feel... respected."

"Hmm, breaking him of his old habits, we are," Master Yoda said nonchalantly. Huh. What kind of habits? The implications from this were so wide-spread, Palpatine almost didn't know where to start. Almost.

He plastered a kind smile on his face, making sure to include his eyes in the gesture. "You can be at ease, young man." He expected the boy to slump and relax. Instead, he simply nodded, stood straight and went into a military at-ease position. So it wasn't a fluke, he had some kind of military training. At his age? Something Palpatine approved of, but he was one of the few who did (not that he let anyone know that). Just where did this boy come from?

"I meant you can sit down," he clarified, gesturing to the disgustingly comfortable and lovely chair in the room. Those were going to change the moment he could justify it.

For a couple of seconds, the boy hesitated as if confused. He looked down at the chair, then back at Palpatine, then at Yoda... for permission? Palpatine would have to work on that. Then, as if he were some kind of mannequin, the boy stiffly lowered himself to the seat and sat on the very edge. Jumpy little thing, wasn't he?

Part of Palpatine was annoyed and disappointed because this child would likely not give him an accurate read on the rest of the younglings from the Temple simply due to the shorter amount of time he'd been there. Another part of Palpatine, though, couldn't help but be intrigued in the boy himself. That part of him itched to begin figuring this boy out. But the boy was so rigid and closed... so the Chancellor decided to throw the child a bone as his first 'attack'. "I suppose that meeting the Chancellor like this can be a little overwhelming," he commented, making sure to sound as kind and understanding as he could.

The boy didn't even look up and Palpatine couldn't get a read on him through the Force except for nervousness and worry. He couldn't really tell in regards to what though. Hmm...

Almost as if mirroring his thoughts (what a dreadful idea), the little troll spoke instead. "Mmm, indeed." The boy did look over at Yoda then, and as if taking a cue from the little Jedi, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and relaxed.

If they'd taught him this quickly to rely on their teachers and the Jedi Masters, just how ingrained would it be with the youngings who had been there longer? Sadly, it seemed like the Jedi hadn't gotten quite as lax as he would have liked to think. Good to know. He made a mental note to get started on undermining the Order with the public asap because that looked like it would be his best option at the moment.

Not that he couldn't work with this either. He was Darth Sidious. There wasn't a wall he couldn't tear down, physical, mental or political.

He continued his inner critique of the Jedi Order as he encouraged the boy to introduce himself.

"What is your name, my boy?" He made sure to visibly set aside anything in front of him so as to fully pay attention to the child.

Nervously, the boy's eyes flicked over to Yoda again. Really, Palpatine would have to do something about that reliance quickly. Maybe try to build on the boy's confidence while pointing out (subtly of course) the flaws in the Jedi? Valid but simple. He'd have to think on it some more.

The boy seemed to gain a bit of confidence as he said, "Anakin Skywalker, sir."

Palpatine smiled warmly. "Excellent. I'm pleased to have both you and Master Yoda here today." He made sure to address the boy over the Jedi Council member sitting in the room. Let the boy think that he valued his opinion first. That would definitely be something he could build on. "Although," he added on, glancing over at Yoda for a moment before turning his eyes back to Anakin, "I will admit, I didn't expect the Grandmaster to come himself."

And the confidence left the boy as he looked down again. Palpatine almost let his eyes narrow in thought. Almost. There was a story there, one that hinted at a darker past. He'd have to ferret that out of them. The sooner the better.

Before he could prod the boy into speaking, Master Yoda spoke again, cutting in smoothly. Maybe that was why the boy trusted him? Because the Grandmaster protected him? Plausible but he'd have to get more evidence to support the idea.

"Nervous to meet the Chancellor, Initiate Skywalker was. Some time, I could make."

Palpatine turned his focus back on the boy sitting in front of him. "Ah, yes. Well, now that you're here, I'm not so bad, am I?"

Unfortunately, the boy didn't respond to his smile, simply looking down again. Hmm, so he didn't trust easily. Palpatine could appreciate that, but he figured the attribute came from the boy's past outside the

temple. Which he was getting rather curious about.

"I... suppose not, sir," Anakin said quietly, looking back up at Palpatine with a neutral expression that would be more at home on a man three times his age. So a hard history then?

He made sure his smile widened and he sat back to give an air of relaxation. The boy looked away again. A very hard history. Now the question was, did he not trust people in power (he doubted it with how he seemed to cling to Yoda)? Older males in general? Older humans in general? Or some combination thereof?

Thinking carefully, he realized that he could ask without seeming too intrusive.

"Well, why don't you tell me more about yourself. I know I've met you before. You were at Naboo, right?"

Stiffly, the boy moved his hand and put it into the pocket of his robe where he grasped something. Palpatine wondered what but decided not to press right now. Then he gave a smile that, while it wasn't bad, was obviously forced.

"I was," he confirmed. Hmm, mature despite his obviously distrustful nature. This was starting to paint a very useful picture. "I come from an outer rim planet fairly near there," the boy continued. Funny he didn't mention the specific planet. Was that deliberate? He could chalk it up to maturity or trauma, or the boy could be hiding something. Didn't kids love to brag about where they came from? "Master Qui-gon Jinn and his Padawan, Obi-wan Kenobi, landed there with the Queen and her entourage after escaping the blockade."

The desert planet. Tatooine, if he recalled correctly. At least, that's where Maul's tracker had led him. "Ah, yes, I remember that. Please continue."

The boy nodded firmly once. "Master Qui-gon secured my help in obtaining the parts he needed and in turn he freed me—"

And there it was. "Freed?"

The boy paled and his fear shot up before he managed to get ahold of his emotions. It was frustrating how far he'd come in only two years if he could control his emotions even that well. Palpatine also noted that the boy did not glance at the Jedi Master in this case, simply staring down at Palpatine's desk. Hmm, maybe this wouldn't be as difficult as

he initially thought if he decided to choose this particular youngling to pursue.

"Yes, sir," he finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I was a slave."

Well, that certainly fit the picture Palpatine had been getting. Sometimes confident because he was learning to leave his slave past behind him, but still unable to really shake off the ingrained habits. Yes, Palpatine could work with this.

He made sure to put on a suitably horrified face and sent out a pulse of revulsion through the Force, one that would be expected from a civilian non-sensitive.

He had to admit, he was proud of his control. Most Sith didn't care about control, but it was what would finally bring the Jedi down.

"That's... terrible! I... didn't know things like that still happened in the universe. The Republic's laws should counter all of that!" Ha! What could a broken republic even hope to do?

"It was hutt territory," the blond boy muttered. Inwardly, Sidious frowned. There would be no 'hutt' space when he was done with his plans... at least, not like it was today. Outwardly he kept his sympathetic face on.

"Your..." he paused as if looking for the right word, "master must have run you ragged." With how the boy reacted, he had no doubt. Although there was one thing that didn't quite fit the 'hutt-space slave'. "You speak very well for a child your age, let alone a slave. That's quite the accomplishment."

An expression he couldn't read crossed the boy's face. "He... was very strict," Anakin said, then looked away again.

"You poor child," Palpatine said, sympathetic without sounding too pitying.

Again, the boy didn't respond. The boy had been opening and closing his hand around something in his pocket, and now he'd seemed to stop on 'closed'. Some sort of comfort item, perhaps?

"I.. don't need your pity," the boy said in a harsh voice that was music to Sidious' ears. He could hear and feel the resentment, and the boy had quite the well of such a negative feeling... how delightful. Now if

only it could be turned correctly...

Palpatine glanced at Yoda before turning back to Anakin apologetically. "Of course not," he said with a nod of his head. "My apologies."

The child searched his face for a couple of seconds before looking away again. Hmm. Yes, this would take a bit of work. But it would be so amusing. Something about this boy...

"In any case, please, continue," he said after a couple of moments that the boy should feel awkward or resentful in. From what Palpatine could sense, it was working.

The boy's eyes met his again. "I... was brought back to the Jedi Temple," he said simply.

Hmm, uncomfortable. Well, Palpatine wouldn't pry... for now. "Yes, I remember. How old were you?"

The boy glanced at Yoda again. "... Nine, My Lord."

Oh, Sidious *liked* the sound of that... but he couldn't allow it. He couldn't raise suspicions. His own gaze darted over to the green Jedi who seemed to have fallen asleep. The old troll. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

"Please, just Chancellor will do."

The boy paused for a couple of seconds before nodding slowly. "Yes, Chancellor."

"You were nine? I was under the impression that that was too old to begin training to become a Jedi." May as well get some more questions answered.

This time, the boy turned deliberately to Yoda. Palpatine decided to follow his lead in this case and did the same. Yoda, whose eyes had been closed not moments before, was not watching Palpatine. Once the two Jedis' gazes met, the old troll shrugged nonchalantly.

"Considering some changes, we are. Spoken about this before, the Council has. An opportunity we saw when presented Initiate Skywalker was." Oh, that was *not* good... no, he needed to stop or undermine any reform the Jedi were going through. He mentally cursed at not having a spy (unwitting or not) on the Council

anymore... he'd have to change that. He hadn't heard anything about this before.

As of this point in the conversation, the best way to play this would be thoughtful. He could brainstorm on ways to stop anything from happening later. But better to play to placation for the moment. It would be detrimental to burn bridges right now. "Ah, so you might be the first of many new Jedi your age."

"If it goes well, sir," Anakin responded quietly.

Another grandfatherly smile. "Oh, I'm sure it will. You seem like a bright young lad."

A small smile appeared on the boy's face. So he did respond well to praise and other such stimulation if enough was heaped on. Good to know.

"Thank you, sir," he said softly.

Well, that could be the end of that particular conversation, and Palpatine had gotten plenty out of it, so he decided to move on.

"Well," he leaned forward on his desk towards Anakin again, folding his hands in front of him, "let me tell you what I expect of you, Initiate Skywalker." He went on with a short summary about running errands and emphasized how Anakin could come to him or his secretary (whom he hadn't gotten a chance to replace yet, but he wanted to find just the right person before he did) if he had any problems or questions. He didn't expect the boy to take him up on his offer initially, but Sidious could be very patient.

When he finished, the boy nodded and bowed a little. "Thank you, sir." The boy looked a little embarrassed. Perhaps he was getting over how worried he'd been? Either that, or the boy was a decent actor. He'd try and figure out which it was later.

"Excellent. Now, I have some holopads for you to deliver..." he said as he took out a stack of data pads and explained where each one went. Anakin had a look of extreme concentration on his face, as if he knew he'd be punished if he failed. A slave background, huh? He'd definitely have to look into that.

When he was finished, the boy nodded, stood and bowed before taking the holopads and turning to the door without a word. Funny, he didn't wait for Master Yoda, who had already gotten down from his

chair and bowed at the Chancellor.

"I hope to see you before you leave today, Initiate Skywalker," he called out after the child's retreating back. The boy froze for a couple of seconds. "And thank you for coming Master Yoda," he said to the shuffling master.

"Hmm. No trouble, it was," Yoda said pleasantly. "Good day, Chancellor."

Palpatine watched the two of them leave, with Master Yoda calling out after the boy, who finally seemed to realize whom he'd left behind. The door shut behind Master Yoda and Palpatine sat back, contemplating.

How fortunate that he got the slave boy as his first ambassador. Which brought up the question, why would the Jedi choose him of all children? Were they trying to make something up to the child somehow? That didn't seem like the Jedi he'd known of. Even now Dooku could go on an hour-long rant about the Jedi Order and how inattentive (and stagnant) it was. He would have to ask exactly why Anakin was chosen. He doubted the boy had asked for this, unless he was some sort of masochist. He obviously didn't like being here – did he like being in the program at all? Hmm, there were quite a few ways to approach this...

He wondered if he could break the boy in only three months... or if it would take even that long.

xXx

Not an hour later, Initiate Skywalker came back. Sidious could sense him, but he didn't enter the office. A couple of minutes after that, the boy left, apparently having gotten something from Mrs. Meddion. It went on like that for the next couple of hours, making it rather obvious that the boy was nervous about coming in to talk to the Chancellor.

That was acceptable for now, but something Palpatine wanted to fix.

Finally, it was time for young Skywalker to leave. He felt the boy approach the door and made sure to keep doing his own work until his secretary called in. "Chancellor, Initiate Skywalker is ready to leave. Would you still like to see him before he goes?"

"Oh, yes," he replied, "of course. Please, send him in."

It took the child a little longer to come in than it really should have, but Palpatine pretended not to notice.

"Ah, there you are, my boy. Why don't you come in and talk with me for a minute before you leave."

The boy's face remained blank as he bowed and shook his head. "Please forgive me, Chancellor, but if I stay any later, I will miss an appointment myself. I... just wanted to thank you for this opportunity."

"You are more than welcome," Palpatine said warmly. "Can you at least tell me if you enjoyed your day, or learned something?"

"I did enjoy today," the boy said, although he didn't look it. "It kept me busy."

"You like to be busy then."

A slight pause. "Yes, sir."

"I will keep that in mind, but I want you to know that you are not here to be worked to the bone. You are more than welcome to take your time. I would like to get to know you as well, so don't be a stranger when you're here."

"I will... keep that in mind, sir. May I have your leave?"

Palpatine cocked his head to one side. He would *not* let this boy go without getting some answers. "Were you some kind of host before you came to the Jedi? I'm just curious as to how you speak so well."

He saw the boy stiffen ever so slightly. "I... often ran a shop for my master. I dealt with customers on a regular basis."

"Is that when you learned to speak basic?"

"Yes, sir. I have had to know both basic and Huttese for as long as I can remember, although Huttese is my native language."

"I can't believe you were worked so hard, especially at your age," he tutted quietly. "Utterly criminal. I'm terribly glad you were chosen to come here."

"As am I, sir," the boy responded mechanically. "Thank you. May I go?"

Well, if he was that dead-set on leaving, Palpatine figured pushing him was probably not his best option right now.

"Of course, of course. Thank you again for your hard work, Anakin. I will see you again next week, yes?"

"Yes, of course, Chancellor," the boy said with a picture-perfect bow before turning and leaving. Palpatine watched the door after he left for several seconds, unable to keep a grin off of his face. This was going to be amusing.

xXx

Anakin fled from the Senate building. Well, he didn't run out. He made sure to walk calmly down to catch an air-taxi that would take him and a couple of his fellow initiates back to the Temple. He did, however, take the most direct route and did not stop for anyone, putting the hood of his robe up and over his head before walking firmly out. If anyone noticed him or called his way, he didn't acknowledge them, despite being hyper aware of those around him.

He barely acknowledged the other initiates (thankfully Hik'te wasn't among them, apparently he had a different ambassador schedule than Anakin) and sat quietly in the back with his arms folded into his robes.

Walking calmly off of the taxi, he paused for a moment and allowed himself to *think* for the first time since he'd left the Chancellor's office and just allow himself to revel in the fact that the presence of the man who had oppressed him for years was no longer in the immediate vicinity. He didn't feel safe at the Jedi Temple, per se, but it was better. Right now he had to cling to 'better' because otherwise he would shatter... and he couldn't afford to do that.

"Anakin?"

The former Sith blinked and glanced up to see Siri Tachi standing there worriedly. He glanced around, and yes, he hadn't moved from the stairs of the Jedi Temple.

"What... are you doing out here?" he asked.

Her gaze flattened ever so slightly as if to wonder why he'd asked that. "We know that picking you up at the Senate Building would have been suspicious. That doesn't mean someone couldn't be here to meet you and make sure you're alright."

Oh. Well, he supposed that made sense.

So he bowed. "I am fine, Knight Tachi. Your concern is... appreciated."

With that, he strode past her and into the temple.

"Where are you going?" she asked as she fell into step beside him.

"I require sustenance. I wished to obtain what I could before going to speak with Master Xio."

"Anakin, wait." An arm on his shoulder stopped him. His first thought was that *no one* should touch him and it took a great deal of effort to not simply turn around and...

He blinked and realized where his mind had just gone. He shied away from the uncomfortable thought. Had he really just had the idea to try and hurt – maybe even kill Siri?

"What is it?" he asked, his voice as emotionless as he could get it.

Siri's eyebrow furrowed worriedly. "Anakin, what did he do to you?"

Anakin frowned ever so slightly. "Nothing."

She looked highly skeptical. "Then why are you acting like this?"

"Like what?"

"Like..." she paused and glanced around, making sure they were alone. She had to wait a few moments and that alone raised Anakin's hackles. "Like Vader."

His eyes widened and he took a step back from her as if she'd slapped him, despite the fact that she'd delivered the words in a soft, concerned tone. "What?" he practically hissed, hoping that his face hadn't gone too pale.

She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I realize that you're not going around killing people, and I doubt you're about to—" he carefully avoided thinking about the thought he'd just had as she continued, "–but do you really think that's all there was to Vader? In the last couple of years, you've learned to relax and be ready, more focused on growing than putting on a mask. You've been far more open and honest with both yourself and everyone around you and you... you seemed happier. Now, it's like all of that is gone. Your stance is stiff and formal, like you're about to present something or be

presented – like you're being scrutinized. Have you noticed how you lock your arms behind you back or put them on your hips when you're upset? Well, I have."

Anakin looked down and indeed found that she was correct. Part of him wanted to move out of the stance immediately, distancing himself from that time in his life, while another part wanted to pretend that this was normal, just to try and maintain some of his dignity.

Before he could really do anything else, though, Siri went on.

"You haven't called me 'Knight Tachi' in over a year and you're speaking far more formally than you have since you came to the Temple initially. So don't tell me he didn't do anything." She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him, a mixture of anger, disappointment and worry causing him to want to shuffle in place.

Slowly, he moved his arms down to hang by his side and relaxed his body as best he could, looking away from her.

"It's true."

He could practically hear her rolling her eyes as if praying for patience. "What is?"

His hands clenched into fists. "That he didn't do anything. He greeted me, with Master Yoda there, he gave me some instructions and then he let me go."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her anger melt to puzzlement. "Really? He didn't get you to give away any information at all? Didn't make you question yourself or anyone around you?"

Well, now that she mentioned it... "I... suppose he did get some information I would have preferred he... didn't." Then he snorted softly. "And it is impossible to come out of a discussion with him without him having tried to plant some sort of suggestion."

"So he didn't do 'nothing' to you. He was his usual nasty self, just hidden behind that warm, welcoming mask."

Anakin felt himself relaxing a little more as she spoke. "Yes... I suppose so. Not that we expected differently... but..."

"It's the experience again," she finished softly. Then she sighed and bent down to put a hand on his shoulder. "Anakin, I know that..."

again she paused and glanced around. The hall was large enough, though, that he doubted any Jedi not purposefully trying to overhear them would even notice their discussion. She still dropped her voice down to a lower decibel as she spoke, which he appreciated. "I know that 'Vader' – the mask you put on when you were him – kept you safe from him. Well, the safest you could be. But it isn't keeping you safe now. It's just going to hurt you – and us – if you continue to act like who you used to be when *that man* isn't around."

Visibly, her words didn't seem to have as much of an impact as before, but the reality couldn't be further from the truth. He sat there for several seconds wondering on what she'd said and why her words seemed to put everything into a perspective he'd only vaguely even been aware of before. Had he really acted as he did when he'd been Vader as a way to keep himself safe? Eventually he came to the conclusion that yes, that was part of it. Towards the end, a large part of it. He had to act the way Sidious had expected so as to not draw too much negative (painful and restricting) attention. And acting in similar ways now was his mind's twisted way of protecting him.

Hadn't Girth and Master Xio both stated that he would be tempted to fall back into old habits? Was this why? Although that particular connection sounded like one of his therapists in particular.

"You've been talking about this to Healer Girth, haven't you."

She scratched at her cheek as her face colored ever so slightly, giving away the answer almost immediately. "Yes." She seemed to realize something and hurried to amend, "But we're not talking about you behind your back."

He shook his head and managed a small smile. It was leaps and bounds of improvement over how he'd just acted and how he'd acted when he'd first come to the Temple. The fact that he could realize and recognize that was probably a big step too and he was finally able to let go of his tension altogether. He knew it wouldn't last, but he could take advantage of it now.

"I know," he assured Siri. "I'm not exactly a subject you can avoid in your sessions."

She returned the smile through her relief at his assurance. "You're really not. Although you're not quite as prominent as some might think."

"Oh? And who else plays parts in these sessions, if I may ask?" He was

surprised that he could sound a little teasing right now. It was like night and day to even five minutes before. Siri really was good for him, he suddenly realized.

She rolled her eyes. "Chosen one or not, the universe doesn't revolve around you."

"I'm guessing Obi-wan plays his part then."

Was it just him, or had her blush returned? "And Ferrus, all of my fellow Jedi – we've had some *very* interesting discussions involving Quinlain Vos."

Anakin snorted.

"And the war, and the clones and... Macro."

Something about how her tone dropped sadly clued him in.

"Was he your clone commander?"

She nodded grimly and turned to walk further into the Temple. Anakin fell into step beside her. "Yes. I know I... died rather early on in the war, but I still had a Clone commander at my side for a couple of battles. He... saved my sorry butt a couple of times."

He noted her pathetic attempt to raise the mood again, but didn't feel like trying to contribute to it as something had occurred to him.

"I... haven't even started to talk about my... death." Of course, a lot of that would probably come after they'd really started to tackle specifics of his life as Vader... which they hadn't yet. Both Girth and Xio insisted that he had to be in a fairly stable, supported and safe place before he could attack that particular monster and that he should do so when he's ready.

He still wasn't sure if he ever really would be.

"Did you see it?" he heard himself asking, suddenly curious. "My death?"

She glanced over at him before looking back ahead of them. "I remember it, yes. Relatively more peaceful than mine."

He blinked in surprise. "A cyborg electrocuted by his dark master?"

She didn't flinch, but he could tell it was a near thing through their

Force bond. "Well, you died in your son's arms."

"You... died in Obi-wan's."

"It was still rather hectic."

"And my son dragging me away from a planet-sized space station about to implode wasn't?"

He could feel her rolling her eyes. "Fine. Neither of them were that... pleasant."

They walked for a couple of minutes in silence as both mulled on that.

Finally, Anakin found himself speaking, if softly. "I'm... glad Luke was there. I don't really remember much after that except it being peaceful... and wondering how I'd finally found peace when I didn't deserve it."

Wisely, Siri didn't comment on that, instead nodding with a far-away look in her eyes. "I remember that peace. It... was a bit different for me, though, I think. Everything changed after I died. My perspective, the way I processed information, it's a blur to me now... but I remember just wanting to meet the people I cared for in life. I wonder if how we go has something to do with our state of being after we die." She snorted softly. "I'm glad Obi-wan was there for me."

Another few seconds of quiet before they entered the hallway that would lead them to the cafeteria. Then he felt a wave of amusement and a much louder snort from his companion. He was a little concerned that he hadn't been able to sense her so well before... what did that say about his state of being just now?

Shaking that thought away, Anakin looked up at her, raising an eyebrow. "What, may I ask, do you find so amusing?"

She bit her lips as if holding back laughter for a moment before placing a neutral expression on her face.

"I was just wondering how confused someone would be if they did happen to overhear any part of our conversation."

Anakin blinked at her for several seconds, thinking back on everything they'd discussed before he too found himself chuckling.

"That would be... highly amusing to see," he conceded and then

continued to chuckle as Siri broke into a full-on laugh. It didn't last long, but it felt very good.

"Oh," Siri said suddenly, "I just remembered. Apparently Obi-wan is taking Ferus out on a survival training mission."

Anakin felt his smile fade, although he tried to be happy for his old master. He really did. He couldn't help but compare though. "He didn't take me on one of those until I was fourteen."

"Well, to be fair, Ferus has lived in the temple for thirteen years."

He wanted to argue against that, and really, he could. Anakin had been caught up with the temple curriculum two years into his stay the first time, with the exception of a couple of his classes. Even his lightsaber had been at least up to par. He'd really been on his way to excelling by that point.

Still, he had to remember that this Obi-wan had had time to learn and grieve and be on his own before he took a padawan. He had to remember that this Obi-wan wasn't *his* Obi-wan and the fact that he *could* have been was irrelevant. It didn't stop him from being a little jealous though.

"Well," he said, trying to keep his tone light, "at least they won't have to worry about what happened when he took me."

She cocked her head, remembering. "That was the first time Granta Omega showed up, wasn't it?"

Anakin nodded.

"How did you get caught up in my slave-trade mission then?" Siri asked.

"That was one of our first missions. A simple escort mission, actually."

"Ah. I guess I just would have expected Obi-wan to do a survival training sooner."

"Well," Anakin returned, "as you said before, I wasn't exactly conventional."

"Point."

"Speaking of, have you heard anything about who took that mission instead of you?" the former Sith asked, mainly out of curiosity.

Siri slowed her gait and looked around. More Jedi were near now that they were so close to the cafeteria, and most of them were children seeing as it was the creche's cafeteria. She jerked her head to one side, motioning for him to follow her towards an alcove where they'd be able to see if anyone approached them.

"Well, no. I haven't really heard of anything, having gone through the knighting trials more traditionally this time." Actually, they were lucky that the Council had allowed her to be knighted with the occasional relapses she still had, but Adi-Gallia, a couple of her contemporaries on the Council and Master Xio had all argued for it. Siri was on probation, for the most part, but she was considered a full-fledged knight.

"I'm hearing a 'but' in there."

"Well, Master Billaba disappeared around the right time."

Anakin frowned. He hadn't had a whole lot of interaction with Depa Billaba in his previous life. He remembered a scandal surrounding her, though. Something about falling and a memory wipe? He couldn't really remember as it hadn't been extremely important to him at the time. He'd been so self involved... ugh.

"But she's on the Council. Wouldn't that defeat the whole idea of sending a padawan or knight in to begin with? For the unknown factor?"

Siri shrugged. "The Galaxy's a big place and she's *very* good at blending in when she wants to. I suspect that she didn't take the mission initially because the temple was beginning to try out more non-traditional ways of promoting padawans to knights. I volunteered to be a test subject and that was the closest mission they had of sufficient strength to the requirements I had yet to fulfill."

Anakin felt his eyebrows twitch upwards. "Trial by fire, so to speak."

The older blond nodded. "As you can guess, it didn't really catch on until the war broke out."

"Unsurprising," Anakin replied, tone a touch dry. Then he cocked his head. "So you think that Master Billaba is now undercover."

Siri shrugged. "Who's to say? But it does fit her M.O."

"Oh?" the former Sith asked, surprised. "I didn't know her well. Was

she a..." he lowered his voice even further, "shadow?"

At that, Siri's expression fell sadly again. "She could have been if... well, her real status ended up being something a bit more nebulous than that."

"And I suppose that's all you're willing to say."

"My, you're perceptive for a former Sith."

His face fell into a deadpan. "And you're awfully annoying for a former ghost."

She smirked at him. "Not your best comeback, kid."

He rolled his eyes and turned to walk to the cafeteria. "Your immaturity astounds me sometimes. Which one of us is older again?"

"Better," she said after him, and he could hear the smile she still held. "Although the point could be argued. I mean, between the two of us I only have about 45 years... you have what, 47? 48?"

"I'll remember that the next time you try to pull seniority on me."

"Oh, go get your food, old man! And remember, right now, I outrank you."

Anakin snorted and brushed her comment off, but he could still feel her amusement through the bond. Why was it that every time he talked to her she insisted on taking him for an emotional speeder ride? He didn't mind though. As long as he felt those emotions, he felt human still. Not like a ghost or a Sith or a relic of a world that would hopefully never be, and surprisingly, not even a Jedi, but *human*.

He slowed and turned to see her heading off down the hall and recalled his previous thought about how she was good for him. He didn't think he was good for anybody at this point, but if he was remotely close to being good for anyone, it was most likely her.

For several seconds he watched her as she disappeared around the corner of the hall. For the first time, he seriously considered asking her to take him as a 'padawan'. It would solve and even head off a lot of problems. Then he shook his head, because like most changes, it would create as many problems as it solved. That and it didn't really feel... right. Although he wasn't sure if it just wasn't right *yet* or if it would never be.

Chapter End Notes

Extra long chapter to make up for the time it took to get it out.

Not gonna lie, I've had this chapter more or less done for a while, but I am of the opinion that if I cannot handle trolls/harsh criticism, I shouldn't post something. Due to some pretty nasty depression, I haven't been able to handle it recently, emotionally and mentally. It has to do with some personal changes, people who have left my life either by choice or by death (Love you and miss you, Grandma) and getting ready to move on top of my husband wanting to go and see his family, you know, states away... 14 hour drive there, another 14 back... yeah. It's been a busy, roller-coaster of a summer and now I'm FINALLY at a point where I feel I can post this and take whatever comes, for good or bad. Since I prefer harsher criticisms, that really should say a lot about how things have improved.

On a side note, one other thing that has taken time out of my life is me writing a screenplay for a pilot to a series. I'm entering it into a contest, so wish me luck! I'm also working on an original epic fantasy book series and I still have my webcomic going (it's on pause for now, but will be back next month). So, my fan-fic writing might not be quite the top of my list, but I promise that I will NOT abandon this fic! I will end it! It will happen! Although I might just summarize the fourth book, I will most definitely finish this one.

In any case, you have my apologies for being so late. I give permission to tear into it!

Thanks to Khalthar and Carradee for being my beta readers! You guys seriously rock!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin went to see Master Xio right after he got something to eat in the creche's cafeteria. She went through the basics, asking him to replay the conversations he had with Palpatine line by line, what happened with him and Siri (which she highly approved of), and then over how well their plans for his reactions to stress had gone over. He told her the honest truth, that the stress ball had helped some, but not a whole lot. He'd completely forgotten about the mints. She told him that neither she nor Girth had expected much different and asked if he wanted to try other ways to cope. He thought about it, but eventually said he wanted to stick with what they'd already come up with, because while the stress ball may not have helped a lot, it had still helped, and he'd take some over none any day. He'd also try to remember the mints and see if that helped as well. He suspected they would.

Anakin had left her office feeling far more centered than he had when he'd come back to the temple earlier that day. Between his mind-healing session and Siri, he couldn't help but feel that everything had been a huge success.

He still wasn't looking forward to going back next week.

That night, he went racing for the first time since he'd returned from the gathering, happily taking his new lightsaber with him, albeit incognito. What Bleersh didn't know couldn't hurt him, right?

The evening went by without incident (if he didn't count nearly crashing a number of times, but that was fairly normal for this particular racing circuit – he blatantly ignored Master Xio's voice in the back of his head telling him he was falling back on not-so-healthy coping techniques because he didn't have much to actually cope with) and he returned to the temple to sleep the rest of the night off feeling tired, but accomplished.

If only his dreams had gotten the memo that he'd addressed everything he needed to. Despite feeling good about the day, apparently something of his visit to Palpatine had sneaked into his psyche as he found himself walking the halls of the Death Star behind

Grand Moff Tarkin. Except he wasn't towering over the man, but looking up at him, as if he were still an initiate. Confused, he looked down but found his hands covered in the black armor, despite his size.

Worried now, he looked around. The sight behind him made him freeze in his tracks. There lay a veritable hoard of bodies, some decapitated, other missing limbs and arms, some just run through, all of them very dead. Despite being no longer among the living, they all still moved, crawling and stumbling forward. Mutilated children lead the mob, reaching towards him and crying out for his blood, their eyes accusing and hurt and so, so sad...

A buzzing, crackling sound in front of him caused him to whip around just in time to see Sidious (not Tarkin? Where did Tarkin go?) electrocuting one Princess Leia Organa. She screamed in pain and then collapsed.

"NO!" Anakin yelled, his voice mechanical as he stretched out toward the fallen body while Sidious cackled. He reached her and fell to his knees, turning her over only to find that instead of Leia, it was Padmé lying there. She wasn't breathing.

Horrified, he scrambled away as if his life depended on it, eyes fixated on the body lying on the floor of the platform of Mustafar. Somehow the Death Star had changed into this hated memory and he *just wanted to get away*. He backed right up into the clutching, grasping hands of the bodies of those he'd killed. They dragged him backwards, pinning him to the ground and looking on with their blank, dead eyes.

"No," he shouted again, shaking his head. "No! They forgave me! They came to help me on Ilum! This is wrong!"

"How could they forgive you?" A voice that sounded awfully like Sidious whispered to him. "They're not even born yet."

Anakin felt his mouth go dry and squirmed to get away. The voice, mercilessly, went on. "And even if they did forgive you, that doesn't mean you *deserved* it. After all, you were the one who killed them – those souls who were pure enough to forgive even a monster like *you*."

"NO!" Anakin yelled and sat up in his bed, drenched in sweat. His arms shot up to push the grasping hands of the dead away, but he felt nothing and, now that he looked around, saw nothing. After several seconds of frantically searching his initiate's room, he finally realized that it had all been a nightmare.

Forcing himself to take several deep breaths, he lowered his head into his hands. He hadn't had a nightmare that badly in over a year. He hadn't realized that actually speaking with Sidious would affect him this badly. Besides, he'd worked through it, hadn't he? With both Siri and Xio.

Well, everything *today*... but his mind kept whispering to him that he had avoided really going into any serious detail regarding what he'd done as a Sith. The people he'd tortured. The civilizations he'd slaughtered. The planets he'd enslaved. The hope he'd very nearly squelched. The lives he'd ruined...

The voice in his dream had been right. He *didn't* deserve any forgiveness, and he'd known that. He'd known that for a long time now.

He didn't know how long he sat there in the dark feeling more and more depressed, but he knew he wasn't getting back to sleep again that night.

Eventually, a light tapping on his door brought him out of his trance.

"Who's there?" he croaked, wincing at how broken his voice sounded; like glass shattering.

He didn't get an answer except for another knock. Frowning, he got up and practically stumbled over to the door, palming it open once he'd reached it. To his great surprise, on the other side of it stood a little Togruta who looked like she'd been crying. He blinked at the almost five-year-old and then glanced down the hallways. He saw no one.

"Ahsoka?" he asked, shoving aside his own dilemma for the moment and squatting down in front of her. She was a little taller than him when he did that now. Did children always grow up this quickly?

"S-sky-guy," she said hesitantly.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. His clan was at least two hallways up from the Clawmouse clan, and she wasn't supposed to be able to leave her wing without permission. Then again, Anakin knew how easy it was to pick a lock if one really wanted to. And hadn't he taught her class some of the basics a month or two ago?

Oops.

In his defense, he hadn't thought they'd actually, you know, *catch on*.

They were *five* for the Force's sake!

"I... It was cold again. Y-you said if it g-got cold to come and b-beat you up and tell you to st-stop it."

Anakin blinked at the little girl for several seconds before his shoulders slumped and his head dropped. He reached a hand up to rub at his face as he berated himself. How could he keep forgetting that he couldn't let himself fall into traps like that because it dragged others down with him. He was actually kind of surprised Siri wasn't right there with Ahsoka, lightsaber in hand.

"I did say that, didn't I," he said, looking back up at her and then opening his arms. "I'm sorry, Snips."

"Y-you better be!" she said as she ran forward and threw her arms around his neck.

"I didn't mean to make you cry."

"It was so cold and you were so sad and... and... don't do it again! Understand?!"

He couldn't help but snort. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. I'll do my best, alright?"

He felt her nod.

After a few seconds like that, he stood up, picking her up with him. "How about we get you back to your clan, huh? And maybe we won't let them know that I taught you to pick the lock."

She giggled into his shoulder. It was strange, but every moment having her there seemed to drive the doubt and depression further and further away. It wasn't gone, and he could practically feel it at the edge of his psyche, ready to pounce the moment he let his guard down, but he refused to focus on that. Instead he chose to focus on the warm body in his arms as he hacked his own way out of his hallway (seriously, why could padawans and knights enter and exit at will without setting off any alarms, but not the initiates?) and carried the younger initiate to the nearest lift and down to her own hallway.

As he started down towards her room, he felt her arms tighten around his neck and stopped.

"Snips?" he asked quietly.

"Can... you stay with me? For a little while?"

He blinked into the dim light of the hall for a few seconds before a small smile made its way onto his face.

"Sure," he said. "But let's stay out in the common area." He'd rather not be caught in her room. Taking her in to tuck her in was one thing, but actually staying there, well staying in the room of a member of the opposite gender, no matter how young, was strictly forbidden. The initiates learned this at a very young age and realized there were dire consequences for disobeying. Anakin agreed with those consequences too. Besides, he really didn't want to give the wrong idea here. But just sitting with her until she calmed down enough to go to bed was something he could do in one of the softer cushions in the common area.

He didn't expect to find two other children Ahsoka's age sitting on one of the couches, slumped in sleep and illuminated only by the window looking over Coruscant.

"Did they follow you?" Anakin asked Ahsoka, who turned around and blinked.

"I don't know..." she said slowly.

"I'm going to set you down now, okay," he said to her. She nodded and he set her on the other end of the couch. Then he walked over and gently shook the two initiates awake. He'd gotten to know the other members of her clan fairly well when he'd volunteered to teach them as Yoda had suggested he do. The girl was a zultran named Hala. She had dark pink skin and hair just a couple of shades darker and had become rather good friends with Ahsoka. The other was a Mon Calamari boy named Raekar who had been far shier than both of the other girls on their worst days, combined.

"Hey," Anakin said softly as he gently shook them awake. "What are you two doing out here."

"'Soka?" Hala asked wearily, rubbing at her eyes.

"Sky Guy!" Raekar said, although Anakin couldn't tell if it was out of relief or fear.

"Sky Guy!" Hala repeated, even more excitedly, "you gotta help us! 'Soka's gone and we're not good enough with the doors to follow! She was so sad and—"

Anakin held up a hand, cutting the girl off with a small smirk. "You mean her?" he asked, pointing to the end of the couch.

"'Soka!" they both exclaimed, jumping off the couch and racing towards her.

"'Soka! Are you okay?" Hala asked worriedly.

"You just left," Raekar said softly, practically hiding behind Hala.

Ahsoka looked between the two children, not knowing exactly what to do. Then she just pointed at Anakin.

"It was cold so I had to go kick Sky Guy's butt."

Well, at least they hadn't picked up on the harsher language Anakin had let slip once or twice in their presence. Thank the Force for small favors.

Raekar's eyes went even rounder than normal. "Did you?" he asked.

Anakin managed a laugh. It was a little forced, but he did it. "Yeah, she did. I was going to sit with her until she felt good enough to go back to bed."

Hala's eyes practically lit up. "Can we sit with you too?"

Anakin hesitated. He didn't exactly feel like he was worthy of even touching these kids right now (to be honest, he never did, but it was particularly bad right now). Ahsoka was an exception because she was his padawan and family and somehow that mattered, but with these two...

"Um," he said slowly, then looked over at Ahsoka. He couldn't say no to them, so maybe she could? "Is that okay?"

The torgruta seemed to study them all for several (incredibly long) seconds before smiling brightly and nodding.

"Yeah, that's fine."

Which is how Anakin found himself sitting in a cushion with three squirming 4 and 5-year-olds snuggling next to him, wondering just how he'd gotten into this situation. Eventually they coerced him into telling them a story. So he thought back to his days on Tatooine and picked up a myth from the legends his mother had told him. This one was about the goddess Leia.

Five minutes later, they were all asleep and Anakin had no idea how he was ever going to get them all off of him. He could use the Force, but it always became more difficult with sentients and while he was sure he could do it, it could also wake them up seeing as they were Force Sensitive themselves.

So he took a moment to revel in these bright, innocent souls who still, for some reason he could not fathom, wanted to be around him – who trusted him.

He'd betrayed that trust once in another life.

Never again, he vowed.

The next morning, the caretaker was surprised to find all four of them peacefully sleeping in a pile on the cushion. She didn't have the heart to wake them.

xXx

"Ah, Siri," a familiar voice that would normally have Siri brightening up instead made her wince ever so slightly. Still, she pasted on a smile, not entirely faked. She did like seeing her Master. She just... didn't care for their conversations as of late.

"Master!" she turned around and said it brightly.

"Former Master," the dark-skinned woman replied. "How many times do I have to ask you to call me Adi?"

Siri snorted a little, although her smile had begun to feel more genuine. "It feels weird. It sounds weird. It *is* weird. You'll always be my Master, you know?"

Adi's smiled warmly. "And you will always be my Padawan. But you are still a knight and one I consider a friend, so please, call me Adi?"

Could the blond help it if she was practically beaming now? "Fine," she conceded, "Adi. But it's still weird."

Her mentor laughed heartily and Siri savored the moment. It wasn't something that happened often.

"How are you feeling?" Adi asked as she began to walk down the hall. Siri fell into step beside her (which also felt weird, she should be just behind, flanking and protecting her back).

"I am well, Mas—er, Adi," that was going to take some getting used to, but the approval she felt through their bond was like the sun peeking out from behind the clouds. She couldn't help but feel grateful that they'd decided not to separate the training bond yet (on account of her mental health, but still). "Getting stronger every day, and I haven't had a relapse in... months now." Well, not a true relapse. She still tended to have issues when Anakin was in a darker mood, but she was getting better at resisting the void that she could still almost feel – that wanted to pull her back.

"Excellent," Adi said with a smile, then she stopped and turned to Siri with her hands on her hips. "I hate to bring this up again, but are you going to tell me about your bond with the boy and the future now?"

And there went the good mood. Then again, her Master had never been known for beating around the bush.

Siri sighed. "Please, Master, I keep telling you, it isn't my place."

She expected Adi to get angry – in that calm, disapproving way that she did. Instead, though, Siri was surprised to see (and feel) genuine hurt.

"I'm... sorry you can't trust me."

"No, that's not it! It isn't my secret! I promise, if my feelings and pride were the only thing at stake, I'd tell you in a heartbeat but... " she sighed again, fading off before restarting. "Look, I'll speak with Master Yoda," and everyone else involved, "and try to persuade him to let me tell you, but that's the best I can promise right now."

Thankfully, the hurt faded to worry. "What could be so dreadful that Master Yoda has kept it from the council?"

Unwittingly, a series of images – of people (especially Jedi) dying – flashed across her eyes and she had to repress a shudder. "Whatever you're thinking... it isn't nearly bad enough," she whispered.

Naturally, that only increased Adi's worry, but Siri couldn't do much else to alleviate that. She did manage a thin smile though, as she reached out and touched her master's arm. "We're working on it, Master. We'll prevent it, and when the Force says it's alright, we'll speak of it."

Apparently it was Adi's turn to sigh. "I don't like this, Siri. I worry that the more you keep hidden, the worse the effect it will have on you."

Despite her stern, often no-nonsense demeanor, Siri knew that this was only her master worrying about her. She tried to push her gratefulness across their bond. She was glad they'd been allowed to keep it. They hadn't the first time, but apparently the healers wanted a contingency in case she did have a relapse. As annoying as she found it, she couldn't say she really minded.

"Thank you, Master."

Adi sent an equally weak smile back at her. "What was that?"

Siri rolled her eyes. "I mean Adi."

The older woman's smile became that much firmer, and she turned to continue walking.

"In any case, I'm sure you will be happy to know that the Council has seen fit to assign you a mission."

Siri nearly stumbled. "Wait, what?"

"Well, you are a knight, and they need to see if you can handle the rigors of solo missions."

"Really?" she asked, almost thinking that this was too good to be true.

"It's a simple mission," Adi continued regally, "and you won't leave the core, but... I figured I should be the one to tell you."

Siri grinned. "Thank you, Master! I won't let you down. When do I leave?"

"In an hour. They've even cleared a personal ship for you to use. This won't be a luxury you will always have, so I suggest you take advantage of it."

"Yes, Master! I'll go pack! Thank you, Master!" With that, she ran off, hearing the woman call from behind her:

"Adi!"

Siri just snickered.

xXx

Count Dooku had long since realized that Lars had been right; he'd gotten in over his head.

Palpatine had seen through his deception in moments and their interactions had become, more or less, a sort of stalemate between them. As long as Dooku did as he was supposed to, Palpatine would supposedly 'teach' him what he needed to know about the Sith. Most of the time, the 'teaching' involved the Sith Lord showing off to entice Dooku to 'truly' join him.

He'd been bordering on the brink for months now and they both knew it. It had become a war of attrition, and Dooku knew he'd lose if it went on like this. The problem was, he saw no real way out of this. He was actually rather pleased with himself for hanging onto the light for as long as he had. Palpatine would speak against using only the light, and Dooku would remind him that he was there to learn, not to become. That he would help the man, but he would do it in his own way and dark theories should still be applicable to the light. Palpatine wasn't happy and their discussions were getting more and more heated, even if they both still hid their vitriol behind pleasant smiles and cups of tea.

It was getting harder to resist. Between Dooku's natural curiosity and his desire to get onto Sidious' side, he'd considered letting himself fall almost daily since he'd 'joined' Palpatine. But he couldn't help remembering what Lars had said, about how addicting the dark side was and how it wasn't really more powerful. He didn't want his own mind to be twisted by the darkness... but he was beginning to realize that there was really no other way to gain the Sith's trust.

He couldn't find the information he needed without falling. He couldn't fall and keep his same goals, thus rendering his need to gain the information – and any sacrifices thereof – moot.

It wasn't quite a catch 22, but it was pretty close.

"Unknown ship, this is *The Mercurial,* over?" Dooku said into the dashboard of his personal yacht as he approached the origin of a distress signal he sincerely hoped wasn't what he was looking for. Unfortunately, it was the right class of ship, matching one he'd been tracking for almost a month now.

A couple of days before he'd left, Sidious had received a vision about a future war coming and then something about Sifo-Dyas. After that, he'd assigned Dooku to track the Jedi Master down.

With liberal use of the Force and his own ability to research and track, Dooku had found his old friend's trail on the outer rim (which was

strange enough in and of itself, Sifo rarely left the Jedi Temple these days). He'd been on route to the next destination he'd tracked the Jedi Master to, when he'd picked up a distress signal, which led him here.

No response came from the craft, barely larger than a shuttle, drifting and obviously dead in space. That did nothing to calm his worries.

Taking a deep breath, he glanced at the nearby gas giant that had caught the little ship in its orbit. Or the ship had been left there. He couldn't be sure without doing some serious equations that would honestly waste his time more than anything else. Then he looked back at the ship. It looked like he would have to board and see if Sifo had ditched his tail yet again (which was, in all honesty, the best-case scenario as he couldn't sense any life-forms aboard the ship).

He set the calculations into the nav-computer and then let it do the rest, allowing the machines to perfectly align hatches while he went into the back and prepared for whatever he could. He made sure he had a first aid kit and lightsaber while leaving his robe behind. On his way back to the cockpit to check on the ship's progress, he spotted a little, brown, draw-string sack sitting on one of the shelves. For several seconds he contemplated it before reaching up, reverently taking it and putting it in the pocket of a pouch on his belt. Then he continued walking back to the front. Just as he stepped back in the cockpit, a slight jarring let him know that the ships had coupled. He quickly updated his personal log as he scanned the ship inside for anything amiss (for about the fifth time).

It looked like the life support systems were long-dead, but there was air aboard. He decided to take a collapsible re-breather helmet just in case, and slipped some warm gloves on. The temperature inside would be rather cold, but at least temporarily survivable according to the data he'd received. He was sorry to leave his robe behind, but in case he needed to fight a droid or something, he wanted to make sure he could move.

In all honesty, he just felt uneasy about the whole thing and his instincts had saved his life many-a-time before this. He wasn't about to start ignoring them now.

Carefully, he walked to the hatch and opened it. A wash of icy, stale air hit him, and his hand hovered above his lightsaber as he searched with his senses for something – anything – in the cold darkness on the other side.

Nothing. No lights, no noise. Only a tiny, square meter or so of space with two doors, one leading to the engine, the other to the cockpit. So this hadn't even been the size of a shuttle. There must have been some major modifications done to it judging from the size of the ship he'd seen from the outside.

What made his blood run cold, though, were the blaster marks he could see with the light from his own ship shining into the space beyond. They littered the walls, but more importantly the locks to the doors. The slab that was supposed to be keeping the engine away from the rest of the ship had been forced open and now sat half closed, the space behind it a silent, gaping maw of blackness. The door to the cockpit was nearly as black with blaster marks and... yes, lightsaber holes littering it here and there.

So this wasn't a rendezvous point where he'd jumped ship. Dooku's stomach lurched.

Slowly, the former Jedi approached the door, part of him knowing what he would find behind it, the other part of him berating himself for his lack of dignity. He mostly didn't care. No one was here to see him now and this was Sifo-Dyas... his best ally among the Jedi. His friend, even.

Dooku didn't have many people he'd call 'friend'.

Stop acting like a newly minted knight, he told himself firmly. Then he swallowed and used the Force to shove the door open. It took significant effort, but he managed.

The sight on the other side of the doors shattered any hope he'd had.

There, sprawled in the pilot's chair, was his old friend. His chest was riddled with blaster holes and his eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. Frostbite had crept up his fingers and the nose, leaving his skin looking splotchy and too-pale.

Dooku stared at him for several seconds as his hand continued to tighten around his lightsaber and his breath, fogging before him, came out in shorter, quicker gasps.

He'd known what he would likely find. He'd *known*... but he'd hoped...

The idea of never meeting with his friend again, of the life that had been robbed of the Jedi Master in something so senseless as a pirate raid... or a deal gone wrong, seeing as the planet being a meeting

point of some sort was still the most plausible scenario he could come up with.

Dooku was no stranger to death. That didn't make it any easier when things like *this* happened. And he hated it. He *despised* seeing friend after friend, comrade after comrade, innocent after innocent mercilessly slaughtered for *no kriffing reason*.

He took a deep breath, but it only seemed to fuel the rage that boiled beneath his skin. And for the first time, he seriously considered joining Sidious. So what if it would destroy him? As long as he could stop *things* like this from happening. As long as he could make the universe a better place – even if it took bloodshed to get there, because how was that different from where the galaxy was now? They needed a better government, something that would crack down on atrocities like this. Make people so afraid of doing things like this that —

A warmth at his side pulled him out of his progressively spiraling thoughts and he looked down to his side where he'd put...

Eyes widening a little, he lifted the pocket flap, took out the brown pouch and opened the draw string, tipping the contents of the bag onto his hand. A small, smooth but otherwise unremarkable stone fell into his palm. It was a brown-red color, opaque, with small cracks of lighter browns running through it.

Qui-gon had given it to him as a thank you gift when he'd been knighted. Most padawans sought out great presents to give to their masters in thanks upon knighthood – a tradition that had fallen out of practice lately, from what he could tell – and yet, all Qui-gon had given him was this river stone.

And wasn't that so like him? Something anyone else would find useless or pointless, unremarkable and common, Qui-gon found joy in, and had assumed that that joy would transfer over.

In all honesty, Dooku had been beyond disappointed at the gift initially. Alright, for years after Qui-gon had been knighted. And then he'd forgotten he had the blasted thing until he'd cleared out his quarters at the Jedi Temple. Of course, very few things had actually been *his* to keep. Jedi didn't keep things. This had been one of the few things that had come with him, and he only really appreciated it now, after Qui-gon had died.

Because it was from Qui-gon, and it was Dooku's.

And apparently it was Force-sensitive... or something like that.

In all honesty, Dooku had brought the stone with him specifically as a reminder. Deep-cover agents, which he'd been trained to be, tended to immerse themselves so much in their role, that they needed a physical reminder of who they were, their goals and their reasons.

Truthfully, he hadn't been sure that Qui-gon's rock would work, especially against the dark side, but he'd had little else.

He hadn't expected it to somehow reach out to him through the living Force. Just as Qui-gon himself would have had he been there to see that sad display. He'd been within a hair's breath of falling... and how terrifying was that? Even with everything he now knew, he had gone past a point of caring...

Already Dooku could feel his anger receding and helped it along by releasing it to the Force. It left behind only sadness and loss; a longing for both his friend and his former padawan and their presences in his life. He reveled in the heartbreak, allowing himself to really *feel* it for a minute before he took a deep breath and released it to the Force as well.

He would never be truly rid of this sorrow, he knew. As much as he could release, it would always come back to him because the holes they left in his life could never close. He could only work around their absences... and the fact that he hadn't wanted to outlive either of them.

Dooku was an old man. Old and tired and sick of people leaving his life.

Funny, he'd always thought he'd been good at avoiding attachments. Did it take losing those closest to him – at least one of whom he'd tried to push away for years – to realize that attachments weren't avoidable? Not to humans at least. Maybe other species could do it, but not him, and not any human he knew of.

He stood there for several minutes, cradling the now cool stone to his chest as he continued to breathe out his sorrow and anger until he felt more level-headed again.

Then he reached out his hand and used the Force to lift his friend's body up before backtracking into his ship. He still had to check the computers for more information, trace Syfo's path back to where he'd been initially and/or figure out where he'd been headed.

Once he had his friend laid out, he clipped his lightsaber to his belt, knelt and closed the eyes. The skin was stiff and cold, but not too cold to resist too much. Then he took off his cloak, laying it carefully over the pale face of his friend.

After a couple more seconds, he slowly rose and looked at the river stone he still held in his hand.

"Qui-gon," he whispered to the stone, "thank you."

Then he put it back in the pouch and then the pocket on his belt. Even if his apprentice was one with the Force now, he had still given Dooku this.

And the former Jedi had begun to truly realize how precious of a gift it was.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I kind of see Qui-Gon as being this strange, oblivious type of guy who goes around giving stones to people because he things they look pretty. You know, I almost see him as a high-functioning autistic... kind of like me. Without the toxicity, of course... (for me)... I hope. *ahem* I mean, it just makes so much sense. His fixations, his difficulty in understanding what is important to others, his difficulty getting over problems, his bluntness and complete lack of tact when it comes to those he's closest to... Yet something else that was never really addressed by the Jedi. *shrug*

In any case, thanks again to Khalthar and Carradee for beta reading this and being there to bounce ideas. You guys are amazing!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin stirred when something warm on top of him shifted. He'd curled up on his side on a cushion of some kind (it didn't feel like his usual bed) and the heavy thing lay draped across his arms and the side of his chest. There was something else warm pressed against his back and yet another against his leg. Was it the same thing... person? He frowned. He never slept near people. There were a couple of people in whose presence he could sleep, but they were few and far between.

He reached out with the Force and relaxed a little when he felt Ahsoka's Force signature. Then he sighed fondly. Hadn't they talked about this? When they were forced to share sleeping spaces and tents, she needed to try to be a little more conscientious about where her extremities ended up. It wouldn't be the first time he'd woken with an arm across his, or a foot very near his face. Although, now that he brought his sleepy mind to think about it, that didn't seem right. It had been a while since he and Ahsoka had shared a space, hadn't it? Come to think of it, he didn't often sleep so deeply that he had problems waking up.

That's when the warm spot by his back shifted too. Was Obi-wan here? That seemed very wrong too. Then who...?

He reached out and found a presence nowhere nearly as familiar as his old master's, but still one he knew. A youngling Zeltron and...

Wait... what?

His eyes snapped open. Surely enough, Ahsoka had somehow ended up with arms and legs akimbo as she sprawled on top of him. But he could also see another small form down by his knees.

It took a minute for his mind to catch up with him, but thankfully, it did so quickly. It flashed before his eyes in seconds: his trip to the past, speaking to Palpatine for the first time in years and then the nightmares and Ahsoka and her two friends... Blinking the fogginess out of his eyes, he finally realized how he was still surrounded by younglings, but not just the three he remembered from the previous

night. No, at least seven more sat or knelt on the rugs splayed across the floor around him, struggling to begin their morning meditation. Most of them would periodically peek at him and giggle or chuckle quietly before attempting to go back to their exercises.

Anakin felt his cheeks warm and cursed his puberty-ridden body.

"Skyguy?" Ahsoka asked sleepily, rubbing her eyes and looking up at him.

"Umm," came Anakin's articulate answer. He fought down a mild panic as he felt the other two begin to sit up.

Thankfully, the crèche master seemed to notice them at that point and came to rescue him.

"Ah, good, I was just about to wake you. Why don't you three go get yourselves ready and join us back here. I can speak to you then."

The three sleepy children all nodded obediently and slid down off of the large cushion.

"Thanks, Skyguy," Ahsoka said happily, waving at him. The other two followed her lead before disappearing down the hall.

At that point, Anakin stood awkwardly before the crèche master, a human named Master Kobola. She just stared at him patiently, with one eyebrow raised.

"Um... I had a bad dream and Ahsoka may have sensed it and, er... sliced out of the Clawmouse crèche hall to come and comfort me."

Master Kobola's light brown eyes widened in surprise. "She sliced her way out of the crèche?"

Anakin rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly (Force, it had been years since he'd felt this shamefaced). "I may have... accidentally taught them how to slice minor locks a couple of weeks back. In my defense, I didn't think they'd actually remember anything! They're five!" Or younger.

He knew he wouldn't be getting out of this easily and had to keep reminding himself that whatever punishment he got, it would be a fitting punishment that he truly deserved, not the half-beatings that tended to be on the nicer end of the scale of what Palpatine had seen fit to give him. It had been a while since he'd really expected (or even

thought about) something like that, but again, meeting the Sith Master yesterday had apparently screwed over his subconscious.

Thankfully, and much to Anakin's relief, Master Kobola just rolled her eyes in fond exasperation and shook her head, making the short, red curls that around her face bounce. "Children are young and inexperienced, not stupid. You have to be very careful what you teach them, because they tend to be more observant than you realize.

"I could also ask what you were doing slicing the temple locks..." she said reprovingly.

Anakin felt his cheeks heat up again. Why did he have to return to the past just before puberty again? He was a former Jedi Knight who had fought a war, a former Sith Lord who had fought several wars and commanded armies, and he still got embarrassed by a scolding from a crèche master. What the kriff?

"I was just... practicing," he muttered.

The woman sighed and leaned down, putting a hand on his shoulder. "The locks are there for your safety, you know. Your crèche master needs to know where you are at all times to properly care for you. That especially applies to the younger ages."

"Yes ma'am," he said quietly, wondering how she'd gotten him to revert to his more childlike tendencies. Usually only his mother could really do that.

He quickly pushed that thought aside.

Master Kobola sighed, but still didn't sound angry or upset. "So what happened after that?"

Anakin swallowed, reminding himself that he'd done far worse than teaching kids to slice a simple door before he continued. "Well, I brought her back here, where her friends were waiting for her. She'd apparently had a nightmare too because she seemed worried asked me to stay for a little bit. I didn't want to take her to her room if I was staying..."

She nodded, "That would have been inappropriate. You made a good call."

He forced himself to smile at her. "I... guess we just fell asleep after that."

"Yes," she replied, sounding more amused than anything. "Well, I'd prefer you didn't make this a habit, and I'm going to be speaking to both your crèche master and the crèche council. We'll likely change the codes and upgrade the security on the doors. Please don't teach the children how to slice this one."

"Yes, ma'am." Anakin nodded, hoping it didn't look like he'd complied too hurriedly. At least she had no delusion that it would work on him.

She smiled before reaching up and ruffling his hair. Still embarrassed, he let her (what else was he supposed to do, break her arm? Yes, that would go over wonderfully). Then she straightened.

"Now, it's likely time that you get back to your floor before you get into more trouble."

Anakin was only too happy to comply. The sooner he got out of there the better. So he nodded, bowed to the woman and walked as regally as he could out of the room to hide any more of his ridiculous embarrassment that he still could not explain.

Part of him wanted to ask Girth or Master Xio about it... but most of him just wanted to forget it ever happened. This wasn't a big deal, and he kind of wanted to keep it private anyway, both for the embarrassment he could save and the memory in general.

After all, he hadn't woken feeling that well rested in a very long time.

xXx

Yoda watched the young pair of Jedi presenting their findings to the Jedi Council. It had only been a couple of weeks since they had been assigned their task, and they had already put together a rather worrying presentation.

It started with a general survey that the presenting knights had asked a couple of worlds to put on their census reports and some holoweb commercials. The questions had been mostly about the Jedi and what the people of each world thought of them. The results were... not what the Jedi had expected.

Most Non-Jedi seemed to think of the Jedi as either a religion with too much favored bias from the Senate, or an elite class of warriors (or a strange, somewhat nebulous combination thereof) on the Senate/Republic/Chancellor's payroll. A much smaller portion of those who had taken the test saw them as what they were: a peace-keeping

order. Very few had actually *met* Jedi, and most of the survey takers seemed to think that they likely never would (at least, that was the implication the presenters took from the results).

The conclusion Yoda had drawn was that the Jedi were indeed far too removed from the public they were supposed to serve. Both of the presenting Jedi were in agreement on that as well, to an extent. Their structured arguments revolved more around whether they should change that fact or not.

On the one hand, the results stated that Jedi support was on the decline. Jedi needed their sanctuary and refuge from an increasingly more hostile universe. Inevitably, duty would call for them brave the world outside the temple, but keeping the Order apart from the rest of the galaxy did offer that refuge. Also, there were only so many Jedi. Approximately one to every million sapients in the Galaxy were born with force-sensitivity, in general terms, and not all of them (not even *half* of them) ended up joining the Order at all. Then the age limit and the corps took even more away (although the Order still counted them as Jedi, and it was likely the people who met them did as well) so at any given point, there simply weren't enough Jedi to really begin intense new projects and initiatives. Even working out the logistics of somehow trying to meet the public at large would be difficult to say the least.

And yet, as the current Jedi presenter, Knight Ranhoran, outright argued that they had to do something. Jedi, as they currently were, could not understand the public without ever interacting with them, and thus, the public could not understand Jedi. By extension, they also couldn't truly trust Jedi and based their knowledge of the Order on ancient legends or holovids that most likely weren't even remotely accurate to begin with. The Galaxy's population just didn't know anything concrete or true about them. And people tend to fear what they do not understand.

It was Knight Ranhoran's opinion that they should try and get some true information out to the galaxy; make some documentaries about the Jedi, give some interviews, have padawans give presentations to local schools. He argued that they needed to let the universe see and understand more of what went on in a Jedi's life. They could do so without giving away too many hints on how to infiltrate the Jedi temple or spot Jedi on missions.

The argument to this, of course, centered around how that would be giving information to people who could potentially damage the Jedi

Order. People who could read in between the lines and who could parse together a great deal of information on simple hints and an in-depth analysis.

But was that worth the risks that came of being so removed from the Galaxy? Was that defense their best defense? And was it truly that difficult to work around or find solutions to? It was true that many cultures still looked favorably on the Order, but there were far more cultures who were openly neutral or critical of the Jedi – sometimes to a point of outright hatred – than anyone had expected. There wasn't a way to really avoid offending someone in diplomatic situations, but Yoda didn't think anyone had realized just how many worlds had developed negative opinions about the Order. The Grandmaster only knew because he'd seen the unfiltered results. He'd given the two Jedi who had been tasked with filtering and taking out the useless or "trolling" (the connotation still made him a little grumpy) comments out two weeks of vacation to recuperate. He hoped it was enough.

The conclusions had been sobering and made the future Anakin and Siri had described far more believable than it had seemed before.

Once the two knights had finished presenting what they'd uncovered as well as their arguments, they both bowed and stood silently, waiting to answer questions. A couple of masters spoke up, but Yoda didn't listen closely, too focused on closing his eyes and asking the Force.

The cloudiness that had been popping up lately came with the otherwise warm, familiar sensation, making Yoda frown. But he still got a positive sense from it regarding this topic. He wondered if everyone else would.

"Discuss this topic, we will," Yoda finally said once a long enough pause in the noise registered.

Beside him, Mace nodded at the two presenters. "Thank you for reporting your findings today. You may leave now."

Both of the knights bowed again before retreating, leaving the Council in silence.

Once the large doors closed, the debate began.

"They bring up some very good points," Plo Koon said softly.

"Indeed," Ki-Adi-Mundi agreed. "But the question does come down to

this: Do we give up our secrets for a chance to connect with the people of the galaxy?"

"Why give up our best form of defense?" Oppo Rancisis asked. "Because our enemies do not know of our ways, they cannot corrupt or pervert them."

Yoda frowned at him. "Many enemies, have we?"

"According to the presentation we just witnessed, Yes," Eeth Koth commented, looking troubled. Beside him, Saesee Tiin nodded calmly.

Oppo Rancisis decided to take up the argument again. "I may not agree personally that the Sith have returned, but that does not mean we should throw caution to the wind. We lose too many Jedi on missions as it is. Giving criminals a view into our culture..." he faded off, shaking his head.

"We can still share more about the Jedi without completely cutting ourselves off from the people," the surprising voice of Evan Piell objected. Yoda and Yaddle hadn't expected he would be initially for this change when they'd discussed it earlier. "And we are not anonymous enough to truly hide behind secrecy. People will simply make up stories about Jedi based on rumors, which can – and have – led to disastrous effects and opinions. I know I am not the only one who has run across a citizen ignorant of our ways who has already judged the Order and made my mission that much harder. We have already lost many to that pitfall."

"The more knowledge enemies have of us, the more likely it is they will find weaknesses to exploit," Saesee Tiin insisted.

"Our duty is to the people of the Republic," Oppo added on. "But do we not have a duty to protect our younglings and our way of life – those traditions laid down by the Jedi of Old – also?"

"But is cutting ourselves off from everyone else the way to protect them? And even then, there are ways we could overcome or work around that," Yaerel Poof commented, tipping his head a little. With his long neck, the position made him look strange, as it always did. He seemed to enjoy making people a little uncomfortable, in good fun of course. His eccentricities had become so common place that most of the Council brushed it off, but some of the newer members still gave him wary looks.

"Who has the time to figure out how to work around it?" Ki-Adi-Mundi

asked.

"It does sound like it would take up a lot of time," Adi-Gallia said, although she looked more troubled than Eeth Koth.

"The small suggestions, we could try. Difficult, it would not be," Yaddle said.

"I don't think this issue can be resolved by a couple of presentations and a documentary, even if their ideas are a good start," Evan commented.

"The Jedi have thrived for a thousand years as we are now. There are reasons we do as we do," Oppo insisted.

"Know them, do you?" Yaddle asked.

That stopped him short. "Master Yaddle?"

"Know all the reasons for all of the rules, do you? Made from times of old, many of them were. Different times, they were." Yoda couldn't help but agree with that. Sometimes, it all felt the same, but sometimes the different periods were so distinct it was difficult to mentally place them on the same world or in the universe at the same times.

"That doesn't stop the fact that these rules have worked," Mace said, seeming a little surprised at Yaddle's comment, but regaining his what little composure he'd lost quickly. "The code has guided us for so long. Why should it stop working?"

"Hmm, change, everything does," Yoda spoke up, resting his head on the top of his gimmer stick. "Stop change, we cannot. Only direct it."

"This is changing the Jedi way, and I cannot approve," Oppo said firmly.

Yoda frowned. He'd known that Oppo Rancisis and Saesee Tiin would likely be the most difficult to sway. And honestly, he knew that they'd have to come up with some sort of compromise before either one of them would approve of it. They were both traditionalists and would need time to see any benefits. Unfortunately, benefits from something like this would likely not be seen for years if not decades.

Perhaps it was time to bring the deeper matter up then.

Yoda frowned at him, and then at the Council in general. Before anyone could speak, he tapped his gimmer stick. It wasn't loud, but it did stop some more comments for a moment.

"Listen to ourselves, we should. Jedi, we are, yet ask the Force, we have not. Listen to the Force, we do not. Noticed, I have, that make decisions out of fear, we do."

A general sense of denial swept over the room. Disappointing. Not surprising, sadly. Honestly, if Yoda didn't have some of the future knowledge he did, he'd be in a similar boat... what a terrifying thought.

"Master Yoda, there is a difference between fear and wariness," Saesee Tiin objected.

Yoda turned and faced the iktochi with a hard stare. Did he honestly think the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order didn't know that? After a couple of seconds, Saesee shifted and looked away. Youngsters these days.

"Have you seen something, Master?" Plo Koon asked softly, speaking for the first time.

The old master sighed. "Yes. Clouded, the Force has been of late. But not completely. If continue as we have, the Jedi Order does, consumed by darkness we will be."

Silence met his words.

Then, finally, Mace spoke hesitantly. "You have... seen this?"

Yoda chose his words carefully. "By the will of the Force has this reached me." Technically true, as it was the will of the Force to send Anakin back in time.

"Do you know what this darkness is?" Eeth Koth asked.

Yes, he did. But he couldn't exactly say that aloud right now. Not if he wanted them to believe him... not if he wanted to save them all. Slow and steady, that would be how he had to present this.

Ugh, it had been centuries since he'd had to think something like that. Maybe he'd gotten soft in his old age? Or more complacent than even he'd realized?

Finally, he shook his head. "See that, I did not." Again, still true. He refused to outright lie to them.

The Council members all exchanged glances. "Nevertheless, keep that in mind, you should, when meditating on this, you are," Yoda finally said. "Wariness; a bad trait to have, it is not. Complacency is. Make decisions out of fear, we should not. Have faith in the Force, we should. Jedi, we are. Rely on ourselves – even our code – alone, we cannot."

No one answered him. He chose to take that as a good sign, even if he could only truly hope they were listening.

The future of the Order and all the Jedi in it depended on it.

xXx

Anakin couldn't help but be a bit frustrated when he found out that Siri had been called on a mission earlier that morning. She hadn't told him anything... not that she needed to, mind, neither one of them answered to the other, but still. He would have liked to have known.

She had left him a message though, so it could have been worse. And in all honesty, he was happy for her. He knew she hated just sitting around as much as he and Obi-wan did. In his younger years, he thought it was a Jedi thing. Now he just thought it was a sapient thing.

He spent the next couple of days going to class, racing and preparing for his next session with Girth, which would come the day before he would be returning to the Senate. At least he didn't have to go with a partner this time, as he had when he'd been assigned to Senators the first time. They'd decided against that with the second 'shuffling', and he couldn't help but be grateful. He had enough to worry about without deflecting Palpatine's manipulation on another youngling.

The day before he was supposed to see Girth, Anakin went to meet Siri as she returned, whole and hale, all of three days after she'd left. Part of him just wanted to be there for her (as she'd been for him), part of him wanted to show her the message he'd just received that morning, and still another part was desperate for a good sparring partner he could battle daily (although he did appreciate the break, as it looked like he'd been developing bad-habits from fighting only her – they'd have to fix that).

"I see you ran into no bad luck," he said as she disembarked from the

transport ship that had been so kind as to drop her off directly at the Temple.

"Don't jinx it," she replied, aiming for a light smack on his head, which he ducked. "I haven't actually turned my report in yet. Just because I'm back at the temple doesn't mean nothing will happen. Especially with you around."

He appreciated the good-natured ribbing, even if she was only half joking.

"I'll walk with you to the Council chamber," he informed her as he fell into step beside her.

She raised an eyebrow as she looked down at him. "That's a bit unusual of you."

"It'll give me a chance to show you this," he replied casually, handing over his comm.

Warily, Siri took it and opened the file Anakin had brought up. At which point she froze, staring at the footage on screen. She could see smoke rising into the atmosphere of a dreary, hard-looking world she knew was Nar Shadda. Then it switched to footage of bodies inside the building and aurobesh scrolled across the scene, informing the viewers that the 'workers' once housed there had most definitely escaped. And while the leader of the company (a slavery ring, Anakin knew, even if the news didn't acknowledge it) had been confirmed dead, several of his officers seemed to have escaped as well.

It was a link that had been sent via comm, and the caption to the message read: "*Ah, yes. Jedi believe in such peace. These are the people you're determined to defend?*"

She sighed and handed the comm back to Anakin. "Jango?" she asked.

He nodded.

They walked on again, the only sound being the tapping of their feet against the floor for several seconds before Anakin spoke up.

"That was the Nar Shadda mission you were supposed to go on, wasn't it." He recognized the face of the dead slaver as he and Obi-wan had accidentally stumbled into Siri's mission the first time around. Siri nodded and Anakin looked back at the image again. "Is... that Master Billaba's M.O. too?"

Siri didn't really want to say yes, he could tell. "Well," she said slowly, "it's not exactly outside of her M.O. Remember what I said about her blending in?"

Anakin blinked at her and then looked back at the footage. "This is her 'blending in'?"

"What's the official story?" Siri asked. She must have missed some of the scrolling info. To be fair, it changed to Huttese about half-way through.

"A technical malfunction with some unspecified equipment – I'm pretty sure it was the slave collars from what I was able to pick up through the subtext – and a revolt from the factory... 'workers'."

"Sounds like the government of Nar Shadda's really trying to cover it up."

"That's what they did the first time with us too."

"True."

"But there was a lot of collateral damage. It's all over the news stations out there, even if they don't seem to know who started it." Although Jango did. How many other people did? And what kind of repercussions would this have? If this was the work of a Council member... "Tell me again what the difference between Jedi and Sith are?"

Siri sighed. "Depa... has a pretty simple outlook in that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. She's good at what she does, tries to follow the letter of the law, goes out of her way to avoid collateral damage, and she's pretty phenomenal at finding loopholes to exploit, but if she cannot see any work around, she'll most likely strive to eliminate the threat where someone else would most likely wait for something better to present itself... like I did."

Well... this was certainly painting the Jedi in an... interesting light. Somehow, he doubted Depa Billaba was the only one who didn't quite fit the Jedi mold Anakin had thought everyone else in the Temple had the first time around. He actually seemed to fit into the Temple a lot better than he'd initially thought... at least now. And how sad was that?

"Pragmatic," he commented. "If a little impatient."

Siri nodded, although she didn't look like she approved. "I really hate to say that I don't know if I disagree, although I think that's the soldier in me coming out. "

Anakin stopped and watched her walk on for a couple of minutes, surprised. "You don't know if you disagree with her?"

The older woman shrugged. "I get why she doesn't just wait once she's exhausted everything else she can think of. In the clone wars, waiting for a better opening would get someone killed nine times out of ten. I suppose it's a matter of opinion what that remaining one time would be."

"True, but I must still admit that I did not expect that from you."

Siri paused and turned to him as he began to walk again and then fell into step beside him when he caught up. "Well, think about it. I chose the long-term infiltration the first time. I did whatever I could, helped everyone I could as much as I could get away with, but didn't really act against him until I was in a better position…and then the circumstances *made* me. That took me years to do. How many slaves did she stop from getting processed by acting now? From even being captured? All because she was willing to take out who she needed to as soon as she possibly could. I don't feel like my infiltration actually helped any more in the end. It may have actually made the situation worse."

The former Sith snorted. "I never said I disagreed with you. Or her."

"I... think that actually scares me."

"Good. It probably should."

She glanced over at Anakin. "I didn't see any evidence of a lightsaber. How does Jango know it's a Jedi who infiltrated the slavery ring?"

Anakin shook his head. "I could never figure out all of his contacts."

That surprised the taller blonde. "Even as the second in command of the Galactic Empire?"

He shot her a pointed look. "There's a reason I wanted to hire this particular man."

Siri whistled, long and low and obviously impressed despite herself.

"So, nothing else from him then?" she asked.

Anakin shook his head.

"Kriff," Siri muttered. Anakin nodded in agreement. It looked like they'd be playing the waiting game... and any contact with Jango would likely come from the bounty hunter or be met with... resistance.

Anakin hated games and he hated waiting, but most of all, he hated that he didn't really have a choice about what to do about Jango at this point.

"When I'm done with my report, would you like to head to the training salles? You look like you could use a good spar." Siri's voice broke through his darkening thoughts, drawing him back to reality.

"Force, please," Anakin responded, not caring that he may have sounded a little desperate and more than a little relieved.

Siri shot him a smile. It wavered a little, but he appreciated the effort. "Alright. Then, on to the Council Chamber. The sooner I get this over with, the better."

"Agreed," Anakin replied.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Some people have commented that Anakin isn't seeing many changes in the Jedi Order. Truthfully, he probably won't for a bit. Once the Council starts pulling heads and sticks out of backsides, that may start to change, but until then... What is done in the Council Room stays in the Council Room.

I would like to thank a couple of people for this: Carradee, Quathis and Everyone who has read this story up to this point. Seriously, thank you. You guys keep me going. So, to you, dear reader, a chapter much sooner than some others. I hope to be a bit more regular for the next few chapters at least. :)

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin and Siri hadn't been able to spar for as long as he would have liked as Siri said she had an engagement to get to. That left Anakin alone to practice his katas and then against droids as everyone else had gone to dinner. He wasn't hungry, so he'd sent a comm text to Hik'te and Coira that he wouldn't be there and to not worry about him.

Eventually, he realized that he was acting out on his frustration and anxiety about the upcoming trip to the Senate again and that he still had some classwork he had to do, so he decided to stop for the night. As he was exiting the room, though, Anakin stumbled across the last person he'd expected to – and one of the last people he'd wanted to. He'd just finished cleaning up when he felt a familiar twinge in the Force. A little surprised, he'd turned just in time to see one Ferus Olin more or less storm into a training room across the hall and down a couple of doors.

At first he found himself surprised that Obi-wan and Ferus had returned after only a week or so. Then his surprise grew when he noticed just how upset the boy looked. Part of Anakin just wanted to walk away. Vader would have wanted to know what was going on, but more to keep awareness and control of the situation than anything else. Clone Wars Anakin wouldn't have had the time, energy or self-awareness to want to do anything. But a young, fresh-from-slavery Anakin would have wanted to help, even if he had no idea how. More importantly, as a young padawan, under a new knight like Obi-wan, Anakin could have really used some help... and now Ferus was in a similar situation. If anyone knew how difficult learning under 'Knight Kenobi the Sith Killer' could be, it would be Anakin.

That, and the Force nudged him in that direction.

Also, if Siri were here, she'd have been over there in a heartbeat. She'd helped Anakin out so much recently, and this felt like something he could actually *do* to pay her back for following him back in time.

Didn't mean he wanted to do it.

Anakin internally groaned, but called out before the door to the other's salle had closed.

"Hey, Ferus Olin, right?"

The boy froze and slowly turned, eyes suspicious and a little red. Anakin pretended not to notice.

"Yeah," he said, defensive.

"I'm Anakin Skywaker, from the Thranta Clan, remember?" Anakin asked, holding his hand out.

Ferus blinked at him, then looked down at the appendage before glancing back up. Did he expect a trap or something? After a moment, he took Anakin's proffered hand and shook it.

"Yes," he said finally. "I... don't remember being introduced to you before."

"Well, we were only in the same combined groups for a couple of months before you became a padawan," Anakin replied with a nonchalant wave of his hand. "In any case, are you here to practice?"

The dark-haired boy (except for that one blond streak) blinked at Anakin, surprised at the question. "Yes."

"Mind if I practice with you?" the 'younger' boy asked. "My sparring partner had to leave early."

Ferus wanted to be alone, Anakin could tell, and part of him wanted to gracefully back out, but the Force was still nudging him... Perhaps Ferus needed just the opposite of what he wanted? Anakin could relate.

"Um... sure, I guess."

"Thanks!" Anakin said, turning up his grin to eleven (and his childishness too, he'd been working on that). "I've been working *really* hard to try and get better at lightsaber fighting."

Ferus frowned. "Why?"

Because he had a Sith Lord to battle.

Anakin shrugged. "Why not? I want to be able to protect the people around me when I become a padawan."

"Oh." Ferus didn't look convinced, but he didn't press the subject. He always had been too sharp for his own good.

"So, what form do you use?" the time-traveler asked.

"My master has been teaching me form IV."

That... was different. Obi-wan had drilled Anakin on form III when he'd been apprenticed. He'd had to ask Obi-wan to teach him form V, although the knight had capitulated fairly easily.

"Because you wanted to learn that form?" Anakin asked as he shut the door.

Ferus didn't answer, just shrugging and looking away. The initiate frowned. That... wasn't like the calm, confident Ferus he remembered, either from his memories or from the initiates' combined clans. But he also didn't seem like he was ready – or willing – to talk, so Anakin just walked to the other side of the room, stretching a bit, and then taking his lightsaber out. He was still a little tired from his own recent practice, but he was sure he could give the padawan a run for his money. Actually, if he couldn't control this entire fight, he'd give up on the lightsaber altogether and go ask Plo Koon to teach him Emerald Lightning.

"What form do you use?" Ferus asked.

Anakin frowned again. It should be obvious from his stance. "Form V."

The other boy nodded. "I thought so. Whenever you're ready."

They sat there for another few seconds, starting to circle each other, before they shot forward, igniting their blades, Anakin just a hair faster than Ferus. It was over far faster than former Sith would have thought, ending up with the older boy on his back and Anakin's blade at his throat.

"A... purple blade?" Ferus asked, looking a little overwhelmed.

Anakin looked down at the amethyst blade emanating from his lightsaber hilt.

"I... came to the Temple a little late and had some training before I came," he said carefully.

"Oh," Ferus replied. Then he took a deep breath. "I yield," he finally

said through gritted teeth.

Anakin turned his blade off and held out his hand for Ferus to take. The boy frowned at it as if it were a snake of some kind before he reached up and took it. Anakin could tell he was frustrated at having lost to a younger student, but Ferus had never been one to make allowances or excuses, especially for himself. He just pushed himself harder.

And, exactly as Anakin had expected, Ferus went into his form IV stance again.

The time-traveler felt a small grin tug at the side of his mouth. He seemed more focused this time than he had before. Good.

Their exchange lasted much longer this time, but ended when Anakin hit the back of Ferus' head with the butt of his hilt. It wouldn't be hard enough to really hurt (let alone concuss) him, but it was enough to trip him up and knock him down. When he looked up, Anakin's blade rested right next to his neck.

"I yield," he said, sounding even more frustrated. "Again!"

Anakin was fine with that. They went back into their stances, and went at it again.

Ferus never won a fight, and Anakin could tell it was really getting to him, but he refused to go too easy on the boy. He'd actually had to hold back a little to make the fight remotely fair, but doubted the other would appreciate knowing that. He wondered why the Force had nudged him over here if his sparring with the older boy would just make everything worse.

"You're getting sloppy," Anakin warned, when Ferus started getting too upset to focus.

Ferus' response was to launch himself forward again. Yeah, Anakin wasn't fighting him like that. So he turned his lightsaber off and lowered it to one side. He watched calmly as Ferus' lightsaber slowed and came to a halt inches away from his face. Well, at least the boy had managed to stop himself. Anakin just waited patiently for the other boy's expression of shock to melt away.

It did. Right back into an expression of calm solemnity that had always been Ferus Olin's default. It was a better expression than the frustrated anger just a couple of moments before.

"Are you... tired?" Ferus asked. There was the boy Anakin remembered. He still had a long way to go before he grew into the man he would eventually become, or even the padawan a younger Anakin had counted as his rival, but the foundation was there. The boy wasn't nearly as unreadable as he obviously wanted to be, it would take a while before he learned that level of calm, but his self control was still impressive for his age. The former Sith could still feel the other boy's frustration (and something deeper, but he hadn't had a chance to really look yet), but here he sat with a face that could have been carved from stone for all the emotion it showed, even if it had taken a bit to get there.

"A little," Anakin said truthfully. "But that isn't why I stopped. You... don't seem happy." He wasn't quite sure how else to say it. He wanted to ask why, when he had Obi-wan to teach him, he seemed so frustrated and angry... but then, Anakin really wasn't one to talk. Pot meet kettle and all that.

"I'm... a little frustrated," Ferus conceded, but didn't go any further.

"If I may, it doesn't seem like some temporary frustration. It seems... deeper." Why did Anakin feel so awkward?

The boy with the single blond lock in his hair finally shut off his lightsaber and looked to the side. "I... don't want to discuss it."

The Force said otherwise.

"Does it have to do with the training trip you just took with your master?" Ferus tensed up. Right on the credits.

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

"Funny, I don't think that's it at all," Anakin observed. "You don't know who to talk to about it and you don't want to *admit* to whatever it is."

Ferus rounded on him, trying to look threatening, but the vulnerability there undermined his glare. "How could you *possibly* know that?!"

"The Force," Anakin replied, then sighed. He was *not* the right person for this. Siri was. But the padawan wouldn't have any reason to trust her either. Force take it. "I'm particularly attuned to it," Anakin said, rubbing the back of his neck. This would either blow up spectacularly or... well, he wasn't sure what the other option was, but Master Yaddle wanted him to trust the Force more, so he'd do his best.

Maybe he should approach it like Girth would? Ugh... did that make him an amateur therapist? Somehow that did *not* strike him as a good thing... Still, he didn't really have any other option he wanted to entertain at this point.

"Whatever you say, it won't leave this room, if you want to tell me what happened."

Ferus still looked like an angry, lost puppy: one of those adorable little pets that Padmé had shown him on Naboo once. Thing was, even those could be vicious when backed into a corner. Anakin knew he'd have to approach this carefully...

Or maybe he should just drag him to his therapy session tomorrow and have Girth take care of it. Yeah, that seemed like a decent idea. Ferus hadn't spoken for several seconds now. They'd be approaching measurements in minutes soon. That couldn't be a good sign.

He was just about to suggest that Ferus come to meet Girth the next day when the boy spoke.

"I... failed."

That looked like it had been painful to say... but was a little too vague for Anakin to work with.

"Failed at what?" he asked cautiously. Was that the right thing to say? Oh, he was *so* not a mind-healer.

"*Everything*!" Ferus practically exploded. Anakin blinked. He'd never known the boy to be the exploding type. Could he get angry? Certainly. Frustrated and upset, annoyed as well, but he'd always tended to get *quieter* when he was dealing with negative emotion. Quieter, but more dangerous, more determined, and more focused. He'd always been the exact opposite of Anakin. It was... strange to see the boy like this. Of course, Anakin hadn't known Ferus until he'd been a little older. Maybe this was how he'd reacted as a child?

Ferus threw his hands in the air angrily. "My master took me on a training mission. It was supposed to be... well different to what it was. He *set me up to fail!* There was no way for me to succeed. What kind of a master does that to their student? And it wasn't just that! Everything I did was just wrong! How could... how could he? And if there's no right way for me to choose, how can I even learn?!"

And Anakin went from having nothing to work with to having far too

much. Where to start? Ugh... he didn't really know. He may as well go with the most obvious.

"He set you up to fail?" he asked.

Ferus, while apparently being the exploding type after all, also seemed to burn out quickly because he suddenly slumped against the nearest wall. "I was supposed to rescue some dummies with vital signs to signify their state of life. Apparently, they'd been 'dead' before my master and I even went in. I was in charge of every decision and it made getting to them take even longer and... if they would have been real people..." he cut off.

Anakin frowned. That sounded like something an older padawan would be subject to, not a younger one. Unless Obi-wan thought he was mature enough to handle it... Which sounded like something Obi-wan would do if he'd had someone with a more traditional Jedi background to work with. Oh, the irony that the boy didn't realize his master thought he was ahead of the curve if he'd given him that lesson. But would he understand that if Anakin explained it to him? He could easily see many of the lessons Obi-wan would want to teach his padawan with that situation, but would explaining them help him or hurt him? Somehow, Anakin felt like he was at a far larger loss here than Ferus.

He walked over and sat near the boy, not right next to him – they weren't that close yet, and may never be (they never had been before) – but hopefully his closer presence would help.

What would Girth do? Hmm, make it personal perhaps? Or at least give an example. An analogy? Well, why not? "I was a slave before I came to the temple, you know," he said quietly, realizing that he'd have to give some context if he wanted to explain how he knew what he was about to talk about. "I grew up on a hutt-owned world and was lucky to be gambled away only once before my first decade."

Ferus had looked over at him with undisguised horror. Well, getting his train of thought away from his own problems would definitely help, Anakin supposed. He hadn't gone into this with that goal in mind, but he'd take happy accidents.

"Death was a very real part of my life... and believe me when I say that sometimes, you start out to save someone and they're already gone. It happens. But the point is to still try. If you don't, then you let the darkness win. I... learned that the hard way." He took his

lightsaber off of his belt and held it in his hand. With its purple crystals symbolizing that he walked the fine line between the light and the dark.

"I think your master wanted you to learn that now, in a controlled environment so you wouldn't have to some time in the future in the field where such a distraction can kill you. In his own way, he was trying to protect you. And he wouldn't have given you such a hard lesson to learn if he didn't think you could handle it. From what I understand, most padawans don't get similar lessons until they're almost ready to become a senior padawan."

"But... I *couldn't* handle it! Every decision... I couldn't seem to make a right choice! Nothing I did was remotely useful to us or the mission! He only had criticism for *every single thing I did*."

Anakin took a deep breath. "That's... well, that's on him." Because Obi-wan had acted very similarly towards Anakin until later on in his apprenticeship as well. The new knight been determined to make the 'Chosen One' into the best Jedi he could be, and would constantly point out what his padawan needed to work on. If he didn't say anything about a subject, then it was acceptable – or even *good*. Anakin had rarely gotten an outright, genuine 'good job', let alone any other praise for the first few years of his Jedi training.

"Your master is the Jedi who found me and brought me back to the Temple. Well, him and his master. Obi-wan... isn't very good at pointing out what someone did right. But, you have to realize that that's because so few people pointed out what he did right to him when he was a padawan. I... think that might be all he knows."

Ferus was staring at him with a similar expression to the horror he'd had before. Anakin could see the realization in his wide eyes just before he slumped back against the wall. They sat like that for several seconds before the dark-haired boy finally spoke.

"That doesn't make it right," he muttered.

"No, it doesn't," Anakin agreed. "But, he isn't some perfect person because he's a Jedi Knight. He's still human. Merely sapient, and he makes mistakes." Many, *many* mistakes. "So... maybe we could point it out to him. He might listen, he might not, but knowing where his intentions lie can help. Also, when you become a Jedi Knight and take on a padawan of your own, you can know what not to do – you can break the cycle."

There, that sounded like the something that Girth would say.

"That still doesn't change the fact that I did almost everything wrong."

Anakin shrugged. "You're a padawan. A new padawan. You're there to learn from your master. You're not there because you're perfect. You'll fail at times, just like every other padawan out there."

Feruse grumbled, a little petulant now. "I didn't used to fail."

It was Anakin's turn to stare at him. Was that what this was about? His *pride*? It took every ounce of will for him not to burst into laughter right then and there. Anakin and Ferus were more alike than he'd like to admit in that case.

"That's part of becoming a padawan," he finally answered when he could trust himself to speak. "The real world isn't like the pretty, sheltered life here at the Temple. You have a solid foundation and know what it's like to succeed. That's a lot more than far too many other sapients get. Now you need to learn that you can't succeed at everything." Even if he'd been introduced to that a little too early for Anakin's taste.

"It... hurts."

Anakin's mirth faded at that. "Yeah, it does. It never stops hurting. You just get used to it and learn to deal with it better."

Ferus turned to look at him again, this time studying Anakin with a furrowed brow. "You know, you don't seem like you're my age. You seem a lot... older."

Anakin wanted to kick himself, but instead he shrugged as nonchalantly as he could. "I told you, I was a slave. Had to grow up a lot faster than other kids. Most slave kids do." He hoped that would cover it. Apparently, it did, because Ferus nodded a little sadly. No pity though. That was one thing he could count on and appreciate about Ferus.

They sat in silence for several seconds before Anakin decided that enough was enough.

"Come on. We'll go find your master and explain things to him." And if Obi-wan didn't know he'd done something wrong already, Anakin was going to give him a piece of his mind. He may not like Ferus all that much, but he identified with the boy too much to not try and help him

out.

Huh. He never thought he'd say that about Ferus Olin.

The dark-haired boy looked at Anakin's hand, contemplating again. Well, at least he wasn't looking at it like it would bite him this time. Then reached out and grabbed it, pulling himself to his feet with Anakin's help.

"Yeah. Um... thanks." He said it awkwardly, like he wasn't used to voicing such things. Anakin just grinned at him.

"No problem."

And surprisingly, really it wasn't.

xXx

They'd just turned down the hall to Ferus' and Obi-wan's apartment when they ran into none other than Obi-wan and Siri. Anakin frowned, wondering if those two had spent so much time around each other the first time around or if that was a new development. Was it a good thing? He wasn't entirely sure...

Obi-wan didn't have eyes for anyone other than his padawan, though.

"Ferus," he said, blinking and taking a step back. Then he breathed out, relieved. "There you are. I'm glad we found you. I..." he glanced over at Siri, who raised an eyebrow at him and nodded, motioning him on. "I... well, I owe you an apology."

Ferus seemed taken back and Anakin felt his own eyebrows approach his hairline. This was new.

"I've been talking to Siri who helped me realize that the lesson I was trying to help you learn... it wasn't appropriate for your skill and mental development right now. You're so mature I thought that it... would be a good lesson for you. I was obviously wrong and I am sorry."

Anakin looked away from them for a moment. Obi-wan had apologized to him, but rarely. And, despite knowing that he needed to move past it, he still felt resentment towards the fact that no one had butted in for him like this when he didn't understand something.

Still, seeing Ferus relax and perk up as if a great weight had been

lifted from his shoulders did feel... good. It still hurt because it was Ferus there, and not Anakin, but knowing that he'd helped Obi-wan by helping his padawan seemed to lift some of Anakin's own emotional burden. Not all of it – not even close – but he'd take what he could get at this point.

"I... have been talking with Initiate Skywalker, too. He... helped me understand some of your... perspective. I know you were just trying to help me. But, Master," he paused and took a deep breath, then said quickly, as if trying to get it all out, "that doesn't make it right."

Another pause. Then a soft sigh. "No, no it doesn't. I am going to be going over some of my training methods with Siri, here, and likely Master Yoda or another Master. I... would also like to prepare for a *real* training outing – one that's more traditional and focused on us learning each other's styles and fighting abilities. It won't be for a little while so we can prepare for it, but we'll only go if that is alright with you."

Ferus had stiffened at the idea of the training outing, but he relaxed again when Obi-wan explained.

"I... I think I would like that," the dark-haired boy said softly. "I'm... sorry I'm not strong enough for your more advanced lessons yet."

"That isn't it at all!" Obi-wan protested at the same time Siri said: "You *are* strong!"

They exchanged glances and Siri backed away, looking apologetic. Obi-wan just looked grateful for the reinforcement. Then he turned back to Ferus.

"It isn't that you aren't strong, Ferus, but that you're a learner and it is unreasonable – unhealthy even – to expect more." Anakin would bet credits that he'd gotten that from Siri who had gotten that from Master Xio (who would never admit that she'd likely gotten it from Girth). "Your life is like a building, and the stability of the higher, more advanced floors are dependent on the lower, more basic floors. I tried to have you build a level 70 floor, when you're only on level 50 or so. It was entirely my fault, not yours."

Funny, Obi-wan hadn't used metaphors like that with Anakin. Maybe because Anakin liked to take those metaphors and pick them apart to try and prove the original point wrong. He didn't do well with allegories and such, being a more hands-on person who had to learn by experience.

"You're actually very advanced for your age," Obi-wan said with a growing smile on his face.

Ferus scoffed and glanced at Anakin. "Then why can't I win a lightsaber fight against an initiate?"

Anakin rolled his eyes. "You also don't spend every free moment you can practicing with a lightsaber. And likely for good reason. You don't *want* to be as paranoid as I am."

"Besides, he usually fights against me," Siri said, looking more amused than anything, although Anakin could tell (likely through their bond) that all of her worry hadn't been alleviated. "And, even though he's an initiate, he's on a Senior Padawan level at least." Actually, it was probably much closer to senior knight level... but that would be his instincts and reflexes finally adjusting to Anakin's new body. He hadn't ever really lost his battle senses, even if they'd gotten rusty, and it did give him an edge over the other initiates and padawans.

"A lot of that is due to my background and the fact that I used to have to fight to survive," the former slave pointed out.

"In any case," Obi-wan said, a little annoyed that they'd gotten off topic, "I promise you're advanced for your age. And even if you weren't you need to grow at your own speed. I thought I was pushing you, but I was rushing you. I will try to not be so harsh in the future."

"You also can't just tell him what's wrong," Anakin heard himself speak up and had to force himself to not cringe when all the attention turned to him again. "I mean, I get that he has to know what's wrong to work on it and improve, but you also have to tell him what he did *right*, because that's just as important."

He wanted to take it all back with how much Ferus seemed to be blushing in embarrassment and how Siri had put her face in her hand. Yeah... Anakin should have kept his mouth shut. Blast it. He never had been good at tact.

Still, Obi-wan – being Obi-wan – took the criticism with grace and nodded. "I'll... keep that in mind."

He looked between Anakin and Ferus as if he'd just realized something, one eyebrow raised in surprise. "I didn't know the two of you knew each other."

"Our clans had common time together for the last couple of months

before he became a padawan," Anakin answered truthfully.

"I... see," Obi-wan said. Ferus just nodded in agreement, still looking embarrassed, but far more relaxed than he had earlier.

"Well, I'll take Anakin back to his clan now. Good night, Obi-wan. Ferus," Siri cut in, bustling forward and ushering the initiate down the hall.

"Oh, yes. Good night Siri, Anakin," Obi-wan called after them, sounding a bit surprised (and was that disappointment?).

"Good night," Ferus repeated.

"Come on," Siri said as she set a brisk pace down the hall.

Anakin looked back at Obi-wan, who was talking with Ferus some more. Then he looked up at Siri. "Wait, was that why you left practice? To go and meet him?"

Was it just him, or was there a faint blush on her cheeks.

"Hurry up," was all she said.

Anakin looked back at Obi-wan one final time before they turned the corner. Then a particularly large grin found its way onto his face. Oh, that was *priceless*. So she and Obi-wan were more or less an item? Very hush-hush, of course, but still. He decided not to press it right now, no... he'd have to wait for the perfect moment. But somehow, that knowledge lifted his own heart just a little.

He didn't say anything until he bid her goodnight when she dropped him off.

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Jango Fett ignored the sweat dripping down his back as he looked through his binoculars at the farm in the distance. Yes, it looked like the family was coming in for the night. Now was the perfect time to implement his plan.

Turning, he quickly hurried down the rocky slope towards the crash at the bottom. That had been fun, sending the hunk of junk he'd bought specifically for this into a large, fairly sheer rock. It was even smoking a bit. Now he just needed to send up some flares. If he attracted some Tuskans, all the better for his story.

He pointed the gun towards the darkening sky and pulled the trigger. The flare shot into the sky and exploded in a show of lights. He'd wait ten or so minutes and send up another one. He also activated his distress beacon.

Then he set to keeping a lookout for the locals.

None of the Tuskans came, unfortunately, but he'd deal.

About half an hour later, he heard the sound of an engine and smiled. Then he got down behind the wreck with his guns out. Three people in an old speeder came over the ledge and, once they spotted him, slowed to a stop several feet away. The youngest, a boy, hopped out of the speeder first, looking towards him warily. The other two got out more slowly. The woman joined the boy as the man stepped forward cautiously. Not cautiously enough. If Jango had wanted to, he could have shot the guy dead at least three times by now. At least the farmer was armed.

"Hello?" he called out in basic.

Jango peeked over the top of the crash. "Who are you?" he asked.

The guy held up his hands in a show of peace. Were all farmers like this? "My name is Cleigg Lars," he said. "Were you the one who shot the flares?"

"So what if I am?" Jango asked.

"We're farmers who live near here, friend, and it looks like you might need a little help."

Jango didn't answer. This was too easy.

"What happened?" Cleigg asked, obviously wanting to keep him talking.

"I'm a bounty hunter," he finally said, because the best lies had a lot of truth in them. "I heard about some... bounty out this way, but ran into some of the locals. They damaged my speeder, but I managed to get away. Lost control of it when it over-heated."

"And then you decided to send up flares?"

Jango shrugged, even though Cliegg could barely see him. "If I gotta go out, I'd rather go out fighting. But I figured *someone* might see the

emergency signal. Then I'd at least have a fighting chance."

"I see. Who... was your bounty?"

So he wasn't stupid. Of course, one didn't survive on a planet like Tatooine for long if they were stupid.

"Another bounty hunter named Tam. Doesn't really matter. They're probably long gone by now." He injected as much annoyance and frustration into his voice as he could. It should sell the lie.

"I see. Well, our farm is near here. I can offer you a ride in the morning. Can take you as far as Anchorhead if you would like. Can't go tonight unless we want to run into more Tuskan Raiders."

Jango paused. "You... would trust me?" He didn't have to fake his skepticism.

"Well, we can offer you dinner and a place to sleep, but it's in one of our sheds. And we'll have to lock you in for the night. For your own safety as well as ours. I can guarantee you that it'll be better than staying out here all night."

Psh, if Jango really wanted, he could escape anything these back-water people could cook up. But he appreciated their hospitality, and the fact that they weren't being stupid about it.

"All... right," he said, slowly standing up and raising his own hands to either side. Then he walked around the crash cautiously.

"I'd have your name, friend," Cleigg said as he came forward.

"Jango Fett."

"Jango. You're lucky you crashed around here. Another league in either direction, and we wouldn't have seen you."

The bounty hunter snorted. "I just went through one of the most unlucky sequences in my life, and you call it lucky?"

"Well," Cleigg said with a shrug, "you'll live through it."

A pause. "Point," he said, making a show of putting his blaster away and holding his hand out. Cleigg took it and shook it firmly. So he knew some Republic traditions. Although Jango would bet he was just as well versed in Hutt-space traditions too.

"We'd best get inside. Once first sunset passes, the Tuskans will be out in full force. If there are any near here..." he faded off.

"Right," Jango said with a nod. "Lead the way."

"This is my wife, Shmi, and my son, Owen," Cleigg introduced as they strode back to the car. "Why don't you sit up front?" So the other two could keep an eye on him. Jango could get to like this man.

"It is a pleasure to meet you both," Jango said with a nod of his head.

"Shmi, Owen, this is Jango Fett."

"Pleasure," they both returned with nods of their own. He noted the blasters in holsters on each of their hips.

Funny, of the three of them, the woman seemed the most wary. She also happened to be his target. How interesting.

"Well, we should get going. Is there anything in the crash you need?"

Jango shook his head. "No. I already got everything. If you want to look it over for scrap, it's all yours."

Well, if they managed to get to it before the Jawas did.

"Thank you, friend," Cliegg said with a smile that was just a little too bright. He knew that they didn't have time now and that if other scavengers got here first, there wouldn't be much left. Well, Jango was planning on paying them a bit anyway. Just in case he had to come back, he wanted to be on good terms with them.

They all got into the speeder and immediately started off over the desert, back the way the speeder had come. Good, maybe now Jango would get some answers.

Chapter End Notes

It's before the end of the month! Ha! :D

A note about Shmi since a lot of people were asking: She isn't an actual bounty, more of a personal project. Jango wants to know how she's connected to Luke Lars and the Jedi (since he knows there's a connection) and he's bound and determined to find out. He's not the type to just leave well enough alone if he isn't forced to. If you want more information or a refresher, check out the beginning scene of Chapter 3. Basically, he wants his answers and

since he now has the Clone project he's technically a part of, and the children are too young to really train, he has the time to follow those answers.

Oh, and thanks again to Khalthar and Carradee! You guys are always so helpful!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> AN: There will be some important notes at the end regarding the last couple of chapters. FYI

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Anakin sat down in the armchair across from Girth and looked over the confections he'd brought for Anakin to try this time. They were cookies. Very nicely decorated cookies.

"You know, you do not have to bring such... extravagant food to my sessions. I have never particularly cared as to whether what I put in my mouth looks pleasing or not." Came from living as a slave where you were lucky to get all the food you needed, to living as a Jedi where you got all the food you needed but little else, and then living as a cripple who could only eat through tubes. If it tasted good, he was fine. It could look terrible for all he cared.

Girth raised an eyebrow and smirked a little. "You find these look pleasing, then?"

Anakin shot him a dry, if fond, look. "Not particularly."

The mind-healer snickered a little. It sounded like chittering coming from the rodent-like being. "Do you like the taste of them?" he asked.

The former Sith looked down at the cookie he'd picked up, then raised it to his lips and bit down on it. "I find very few things unappealing," he confessed once he'd swallowed.

"Good," Girth responded with a smile. "I actually have an accord with a local bakery. They give me a good discount on some very high-end products."

"I see," Anakin replied. "If these are easier, then I suppose I have no problem."

"Alright. Let me know if you want something different, though."

Anakin nodded, but doubted he'd really ever have an issue. The initiates didn't often get sweets, but they had a rather large spread to choose from otherwise. Truthfully, the sweets here worked out just

fine for him. He just hadn't wanted Girth to go out of his way to get things that were more expensive when Anakin was honestly just fine with nothing too. Whatever the drall brought didn't have to be works of art to please the initiate.

"So... about last week..." Girth said cautiously.

The former Sith sighed and launched right into it. He went over what had happened, what he'd royally kriffed up on, what had worked to help calm him down, what he'd forgotten, etc.

"Hmm," the mind-healer said once Anakin had finished. "It sounds like it was difficult, but it also sounds like you did a lot right. I mean, he didn't seem to really suspect anything, did he?"

"I honestly don't know," the initiate responded with a shake of his head. "I'd like to think not, but I'm not that naive."

"Still, you should focus just as much on what you did well as what you can improve on. You didn't outright give yourself away and you didn't fall apart in front of him. From what I understand, you actually held it together really well. That is to be commended. Not everyone can face their abuser with such aplomb."

Anakin snorted. "It doesn't feel as if I had much 'aplomb'." Still, hadn't he just told Obi-wan the same thing? That he needed to focus on the good as well as the bad? It was just… it really didn't feel as if he'd done anything right. This wasn't a padawan and his well-meaning master, this was *Palpatine*. Anakin *had* to be hard on himself because they couldn't afford mistakes.

Girth shook his head. "But you did. Perhaps your performance wasn't perfect, and perhaps some things will come back to bite us later, but for *now*, you did better than you thought you could and better than a lot of people do when facing their abusers."

"Most people who face their abusers have both parties on the same page with the similar amounts of information and memories," Anakin pointed out.

The drall sighed. "Perhaps, but you still faced him, and you still did so with calmness on the exterior, if not the interior. You did what you felt you had to, and that is nothing to scoff at, Anakin."

He was feeling a little uncomfortable with all the praise the other was heaping on him. Anakin always hated getting praised for something

that he didn't feel he deserved. Of course, he hadn't felt like he deserved much praise since he'd fallen. Was that something else Palpatine had taken from him? The ability to actually feel pride in himself instead of just relief that he'd finally avoided screwing up altogether? Not that Vader had let that insecurity show either, but now that he thought about it... As Vader, if something succeeded, then it was business as usual. If something failed, then he was a failure and needed to fix it. There was no 'well done', even if the Emperor had spoken those words. 'Well done' meant he wouldn't get tortured or degraded or leashed in some way.

He hadn't grown up like that. His mother had heaped praise on him when he'd done something well. Obi-wan's praise had been much sparser, but it had still been there. He could remember a couple of times... although not much else. Certainly nowhere near as much as his mother. Was that where this mind-set had started?

Maybe he needed to change it. And maybe he could start by accepting that Girth might have a point...

"Thank you," he heard himself say, and it somehow felt just as hard as learning to express his emotions.

"You are welcome, Anakin. I would not speak so if I did not mean it."

"I know." He refrained from flinching away from the idea that Palpatine had been an abuser. He'd asked Girth not to call him that, but the mind-healer had very gently refused, stating that it was truth, and needed to be stated so. Avoiding it wouldn't change that fact. Anakin could see where he was coming from, so he'd dropped it, but it still made him a little uncomfortable. It was getting better, though.

"Well, you've gone over what happened last week, and you seem to be handling it well. Are you having any problems because of this?"

Anakin shifted a little. "Well, I did have some pretty bad nightmares." Although, none as bad as the first one that night Ahsoka had come for him.

Girth seemed to slump a little, his ears drooping. "I was afraid of that. It was one of the reasons why I was against this. You're opening up your psyche to some pretty deep trauma that you may not be ready for.

"But," he raised a paw to forestall Anakin's protest, "as you said, you may never be entirely "ready" for it, so I understand. Fortunately,

you're doing what you need to treat your nightmares. Therapy and talking about them, trying to understand why your psyche is bringing them up, can help you understand more about yourself. Would... you like to share your dreams?"

Anakin felt himself shut down because no, he really didn't want to talk about those nightmares. He'd have to explain an awful lot that he'd prefer to never even think about again... but then, that was likely part of the issue. He'd come to realize that ignoring his problems wouldn't help... and he was definitely trying to ignore these now. He couldn't *afford* to keep doing that, not with Palpatine and his machinations to 'look forward' to.

"No," he said emotionlessly. "But I will."

"Only if you feel you can," Girth said quickly.

Anakin took a deep, calming breath and tried to release all of his anger and fear and worry to the Force. "I... will likely have to if I am to continue to... face *him*."

The drall didn't look terribly convinced, but he did motion for Anakin to continue. "If you're sure..."

The former Sith forced himself to think back on what he could remember of the dream. "To start, I was walking down the halls of the Death Star—"

"The what?" Girth asked, sounding alarmed. Whatever he was thinking, it wasn't bad enough.

Anakin sighed. This would take some explaining. "In the future, the Emperor commissioned a battle station. Initial specs had it larger than some major moons. Eventually it was cut back to the size of a small moon."

Girth's eyes went wide. "A *movable* battle station that large?"

Anakin nodded. "It... could destroy an entire planet." The flesh on Girth's lips lightened, signifying the drall had just gone pale. Anakin decided that he needed to drive the point home and that yes, this was an operational station. "I watched it destroy Alderaan myself."

The mind-healer swallowed and looked away as he tried to wrap his head around that. Meanwhile, Anakin tried very hard not to remember how he'd held the Princess – his own *daughter* – back while

she watched her entire world explode.

Perhaps that was why she'd been in the dream on the Death Star? How nice of his subconscious.

"In any case, I was my current age," Anakin went on, "but was wearing the suit."

"The life-support suit you told us about?" Girth asked.

Anakin gave a single nod of affirmation. "That suit... it defined me. It kept me alive, but kept me a slave to the Emperor. I doubt there was a single sapient being who did not know it by sight or by sound."

"Sound?" the drall seemed to be regaining his composure rather quickly. Impressive. Although, he'd come to expect such from his mind-healers.

"Yes. My respirator gave off a very... unique sound."

"I see," Girth said, then sat back, waiting for Anakin to go on. He also reached over and picked up a datapad from the table at his side.

Anakin watched him for a moment before going on. "I... have never been that size in my dreams before while wearing it." Girth glanced up and nodded at Anakin to show he was still listening.

"I was following one of the Grand Moffs. He was initially in charge of the Death Star."

Girth cocked his head to one side. "Why him and not you? Weren't you second-in-command?"

It had been a sore point that the Emperor had given control of the station to Tarkin over Vader. Anakin hated that that fact still bothered him. He understood why everything had worked out that way, but it still annoyed him. Just as the Emperor had wanted it to, undoubtedly.

"I had made my general... distaste for the project rather well known. Thus, he was to be in charge of the station, and I was to answer to him." That, and he'd let the plans for the station get stolen to begin with. It had been a punishment. Pure and simple. "I am sure at least part of the reason the Emperor did that to me because the plans to the Death Star had been stolen under my watch."

"He punished you like that often?"

Anakin looked to the side. "When I was lucky."

More silence and the former Sith decided to continue. "In any case, in the dream, we in turn were followed by a host of... the undead. I recognized them as people I had... killed."

Girth frowned. "You haven't spoken much of what you were forced to do under that man." What he'd been forced to do... what he'd chosen to do... what had happened... and he had to go through it? Anakin swallowed and realized that the mind-healer had been right. He hadn't been ready for this. He still wasn't. He probably never would be. Seemed to be a recurring theme in his life.

Still, Anakin scoffed at the comment, deciding to set the drall straight. "I chose to do just as much as I was forced to do. Do not delude yourself. I was not a good person, and while some of it came about because I was tricked and groomed, I still chose. In the end, I knew the right choice, and I chose the opposite anyway. I chose to kill the Jedi. All the Jedi... even the..." he stopped for a moment, gathered himself as best he could and finished the sentence. "Even the younglings. They were... leading the hoard of the dead."

The mind-healer just stared at him for several seconds.

"Do... they appear in your nightmares often?"

Anakin looked straight at him. "Yes."

"Do you regret your actions?"

The former Sith took a deep, slow breath again. "It... took me a long time to admit to myself that I regretted my actions from the very moment I took them."

"That is a good sign, Anakin."

He shook his head. "Regret or not, I still did it. I took those innocent lives who trusted me and..." His voice cut off, strangled.

Master Skywalker... what do we do?

Gah! Hadn't he gotten over this?!

Ha! Who was he kidding. You don't just get over something like that. You don't just get over being a monster. Once a monster always a monster. Once a killer, always a killer. Once a Sith—

"Anakin!"

Girth was standing right in front of him. Not touching him, not even very close (smart drall), but Anakin still found himself jumping and only barely stopped himself from throwing out a Force push.

"Listen to me, okay? This is part of learning how to heal," Girth said softly, sadly. "You have to learn to recognize when you will just push yourself too hard and go too far. If this is too much for you, *that's okay*. Not everyone can be strong all the time, and expecting you to be so is not only ridiculous but unhealthy. Sometimes it's after you've broken down that you can rebuild yourself better and stronger. Once you realize that you've made terrible choices and you vow to never make those choices again, that is when you will find your truest strength.

"It doesn't come all at once, and so if you can't go over something because you are not strong enough right now, *tell me, please*. I won't think less of you if you can't handle something."

Anakin swallowed and shrunk back a little. Girth was treating him far better than he should. More than a monster like him...

"I deserve it," he heard himself say. He felt sick remembering the eyes of those children, screaming and horrified and betrayed and so, *so* disappointed. He remembered the lights fading out of those eyes. He was rubbing his hands on his pants and shirt, trying to get the smell off of him, but he still could sense it – the scent of burnt skin...

"Anakin!" Girth said again, firmer but just as gentle somehow. His paws were on the arms of the chair. "You've hurt yourself enough over this."

He shook his head. "There *is* no enough! They trusted me – they *knew* me – and I still slaughtered them *in cold blood.* I took my lightsaber and..." His voice cut off again. Then he was leaning over the edge of the chair before he knew it, emptying the contents of his stomach onto the ground. He hadn't really revisited that memory since he'd come back in time. He'd remembered, and he knew, he hadn't *blocked* it, per se, but he hadn't *gone through* it. For good reason.

How can they forgive you?

Sidious' voice rang through his mind.

A soft, tentative paw was rubbing circles on his back. He didn't want

to be touched – didn't want to hurt the one who would risk touching him. Part of him wanted to lash out, because old habits died hard, but he refrained because he craved it too; the comfort. He craved something he did not deserve and should not receive.

Girth spoke again, almost in a whisper, as if speaking any louder would hurt Anakin. He wasn't entirely incorrect. "I'm not going to lie, Anakin. What you did was horrible. Beyond horrible. It was a despicable act."

Well, at least he'd finally realized the truth.

"That doesn't eliminate your own self worth."

He was still shaking and clinging to the side of the chair like his life depended on it, but he managed to look over at Girth. "What?" he asked.

"All life has worth. Even those who do the most horrendous things. All souls are precious."

That... made no sense. "I... take it you don't believe in capital punishment." Anakin couldn't accept that because Palpatine was too dangerous to live.

Girth sighed. "I... didn't used to. But now, yes, actually, I do. In extreme cases only. If it is ruled by one who has the authority to do so that a murderer is too dangerous, either to themselves or to others, to live free – or if their network would mean they're too dangerous to even live captive, and if their crimes are particularly heinous, then I will – very reluctantly – agree. I hate it. I despise it. But, sometimes, it has to happen. That doesn't mean they don't have worth, and I will try to their – or my – dying breath to help them find that worth if I think I have even a chance.

"But back to the matter at hand, Anakin, you are a good person who has made some monumentally bad decisions. Do you know why those decisions hurt you?"

Anakin frowned. "Yes..."

"Would you ever hurt those children again?"

He felt mortified. He'd barely survived doing that once. The idea of even attempting it a second time made him want to sick up again. "Never," he hissed, ignoring how his shaking increased. Then he took a

deep breath, struggling to release his negative emotions – there were so many of them – to the Force.

"Then you understand something that few people will ever truly grasp: the weight of depravity. You know what it does to the soul, how it weighs down and tears down and what kind of damage it does to the offender."

Anakin just blinked at him for several seconds, feeling the truth of that down to his very core. "Far more than the act of being murdered can ever do to the victims." Which really said so much...

Girth nodded, still smiling sadly. "Exactly."

Silence between them for several seconds as Anakin slowly felt himself calm. "I... wish I had never learned that lesson, valuable as it may be."

The drall nodded in agreement. "I wish you hadn't as well. I wish no one had to learn that, not in the least because it is a difficult lesson to grasp, not just hard to swallow."

"Something that only monsters will understand."

"No," Girth's voice caused him to look over at the rodent again. His nose twitched in agitation. "It is something no true 'monster' can ever understand. They don't have the capacity or the strength to do so. If you understand it, then you are not a monster," his voice quieted again, "even if you've done monstrous things."

And he had. He'd done monstrous things. He'd actively tried to become a monster in the truest sense of the word.

But he did understand. He could grasp how horrible his actions had been. He could understand that he'd never fully heal because of it. It would always stain his soul... It could destroy him if he let it – it almost had. If not for Luke...

Luke, who *somehow* believed in him still. Who always had and always would, despite the fact that he didn't exist in this universe.

He felt tears come to his eyes and tried to hold them back, but they wouldn't stay. He couldn't keep them in. It felt like an overflowing dam about to burst inside of him, in more ways than one.

He wasn't a monster. He'd almost become one, but he wasn't. And that... that made him feel freer than anything else ever could. Not

knowing what else to do, he leaned forward and rested his head on the drall's shoulder.

Then he cried. He cried in mourning for the children – for all their lost potential and their lost days and their lost joys and their lost choices. He cried for all they had been robbed of. He mourned for the other Jedi, shot down and betrayed by those they trusted most – framed and coerced and corralled into corners they had no idea how to get themselves out of. They hadn't been perfect. Some of them hadn't even been truly good, but they'd had their own worth and he'd taken it from them. So he mourned.

He mourned for the clones who had done the betraying, but had literally had no choice in the matter. Slaves until the end.

He mourned for himself – for the shining beacon he could have been had he just learned to *let go*. Had he learned how to not be a slave. Had he learned and realized and understood what the price for his power had really been. Had he just trusted the right person instead of the wrong person. He could have been great, but that was gone, stolen from him, and he mourned.

He even mourned for Palpatine, not because he deserved it – he still didn't – but because of what he *could* have been. The lives he could have saved and improved – the good he could have spread had he so chosen to do so. The loss would be felt for generations.

He mourned for Padmé, who had her own vices and dangerous attractions, but who was still so pure and strong. He mourned for the woman who could honestly and truly rise above the evil of the universe and not let it drag her down. A woman who had been the epitome of what a good person was; who had been his anchor and he'd known it. He'd been set adrift when he'd lost her.

He mourned for his children and the lost days he could have – *should* have – had with them. All of those times he could have told them how proud he was of them or how much he loved them that had never happened – would never happen (which was somehow even sadder).

He mourned for all of the love and happiness lost through his choices.

It *hurt*. So much... and yet, it was a different kind of pain. Like something had been shoved in his soul and left to rot and fester, and he'd just reached in and torn it out, let all of the built up fluid and pus bleed away, leaving the hole open and gaping, but *cleaner* than it had been for more than two decades. It hurt... but it also felt good.

He didn't realize that he and Girth both received three separate calls; one from Siri, Yoda and Obi-wan respectively. Yoda called on behalf of the crèche, where a young Togruta had suddenly broken down crying and couldn't seem to stop. Obi-wan called because he got the feeling Anakin was hurting right now and wanted to know if there was anything he could do to help. Siri's only said seven words: "What do you need me to do?"

From the look on his face, Girth hadn't known now to respond because he hadn't known what Anakin would be alright with sharing. Instead, he'd sat there, patting the poor boy who was also a man who was also a murderer on the back while said boy allowed himself to feel the depths of his sorrow for the first time in almost a quarter of a century. There was a lot to let out.

Anakin didn't know how long he sat there, crying. All he really knew was that when he was done, he felt wrung out and gritty – like he'd been left in a proverbial sandstorm overnight. He felt rough and old and worn, but he also felt lighter than he ever thought he would.

Than he ever thought he should.

But wasn't that the point?

He finally lifted his head, feeling more than a little embarrassed and very childish – silly child body – but he felt... stronger somehow. He knew it wasn't some sort of miracle breakthrough, and it would take time to really rebuild, but now he felt he *could*.

It was a good feeling.

"Better?" Girth asked.

Anakin sent him a watery smile and nodded.

"I think that you've had enough for one day. Do you think you'll be able to handle the Senate tomorrow? It won't be difficult to falsify your illness for a day if not."

Part of Anakin still wanted to say 'yes', that he could handle it. But he'd just seen what happened when he pushed himself too hard and too far and was all too aware that right now, really *couldn't* handle it. Admitting that he couldn't didn't do any favors for his pride, but he couldn't afford to baby his pride. If he walked into that Senate tomorrow, he'd very likely collapse, and he couldn't do that.

Saying it aloud was even harder.

So he didn't. He just shook his head. Girth put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm proud of you, Anakin. So very proud."

He didn't feel like someone who anyone should be proud of. He felt weak and vulnerable... but still stronger than he had been before, somehow.

It was a strange dichotomy.

He was seeing a recurring theme there too. Was all healing some kind of dichotomy? Or maybe just the acknowledgment of the conflicts within oneself?

"We'll call in to the Senate and apologize. Let him know that you came down with a bug and we're treating you. You may have to stay in the hospital wing overnight, though. Is that alright?"

If it meant he didn't have to go back to face Sidious, absolutely. So he nodded.

"Would you like me to call Siri? She can help you get checked into the wing."

He thought about it for a moment, realized that he really would like her company right about now and nodded again.

"Alright. Here," he handed Anakin a cookie. "I think you might need this."

He didn't laugh – he still felt too fragile to even try, but he did manage a smile as he took it with a nod of his head and bit into it while Girth sent a comm call.

"She's on her way. I'm guessing you're not up to talking?"

Anakin shook his head.

"Okay," Girth said softly. "Do you mind if I write a few more notes while this is still fresh on my mind and update Master Xio as to what happened this session?"

The former Sith paused in his chewing and thought about that. Then he shook his head.

"No, you don't mind?"

He shook his head again.

"Would you like me to sit near you or away?"

Anakin looked down. He didn't know why, but he felt that if he opened his mouth, the tentative calm he'd somehow managed to find would burst apart, and he wasn't ready to face that just yet.

"Near you?" Girth must have sensed that, because he was asking 'yes' or 'no' questions, thankfully.

The initiate nodded. That would be difficult, though, because while he didn't fill out the entire armchair, there certainly wasn't enough space for himself and the drall to fit comfortably. He went to get up, because while he didn't really want to move, he wanted the closer contact. He could sit on the floor while Girth took the chair.

"No, no, don't get up," the mind-healer said, holding out a paw. "I don't mind sitting on the ground. It's actually very comfortable for me."

Anakin frowned.

"I promise I'm not exaggerating. Drall rarely have furniture to sit on in our homes. Even the elderly tend to prefer the ground."

The former Sith's frown didn't lessen any, but he did sit back in the chair again, nursing what was left of his cookie. The drall came and sat in front of the chair. Anakin felt himself relaxing against the soft fabric of the furniture piece.

He wouldn't have to go see Sidious tomorrow. He wouldn't have to uphold his facade and try to pretend he was stronger than he could ever truly be. Just for a little while, he could look at the broken remains of his life not try to force it into a shape of some kind - he could let it be.

For the next several minutes he just sat there, contentedly in quiet, while waiting for Siri.

xXx

Sheev Palpatine stood staring out the window and into the Coruscant evening. He had the evening off, and had initially meant to go train,

but then he'd gotten the vision. It had been vague, but without question, there.

A room, round and dark, but somehow out of focus. Children, speaking, even if he couldn't quite make them out – either their words or their faces. But they trusted the figure from whom the vision stemmed.

And then a lightsaber – a blue *lightsaber – ignited. The blade flashed again and again as the children, now trying to get away – running in fear to no avail as they were cut down in cold blood. Then, the figure turned and left their cooling bodies behind.*

It hadn't been Palpatine in the vision, and the whole thing had seemed to come to him as if through the Force's equivalent of static.

He didn't know who it was, although he suspected Vader. That felt right, but made little sense. Why would he get something like that from Vader? Was it a vision? A memory? It felt like a memory.

But that, too, made no sense because the children had most definitely been Jedi. As much as that pleased him, he knew that no single Jedi had fallen to a point where they would have killed those younglings without the rest of the galaxy knowing. The most logical conclusion was that it had to be a vision of events yet to take place.

Or it was a memory of the distant past.

That theory was looking more and more likely.

A Sith displaced in time should not be difficult to find... and yet, he was almost *impossible* to track down.

Had techniques that kept one hidden been lost to the modern Sith? With the rule of two, it wasn't that unlikely. How frustrating. Especially because he couldn't seem to track down a single Sith in history who fit the bill who wasn't accounted for.

Maybe he needed to send Dooku to check on those remains that did fit the bill – once the man fell, of course. Because that was only a matter of time.

But there was still something off here. Something he was missing... and he *hated* missing things. It happened so rarely these days. If only the vision/memory had been clearer. If only he could have seen the room more clearly, or even the children's faces. If only he could have heard what they said when they spoke to the figure with such trust...

He would have to go back through the Sith artifacts and archives and look for a techniques that would explain this – that would answer questions instead of bringing more up.

And he would find them.

After all, he was Darth Sidious, and Darth Sidious doesn't lose.

Chapter End Notes

AN: A couple of things: People wanted to know why Shmi was being targeted by Fett in the last chapter. She isn't an actual bounty, more of a personal project. Jango wants to know how she's connected to Luke Lars and the Jedi and he's bound and determined to find out. He's not the type to just leave well enough alone if he isn't forced to. If you want more information or a refresher, check out the beginning scene of Chapter 3. Basically, he wants his answers and since he now has the Clone project he's technically a part of, and the children are too young to really train, he has the time to follow them

Also, some people were saying that Anakin never met Jango, so why would he want Jango of all people? A. He knew the clones. He put his lives in their hands almost every day during the clone wars. B. He knew Boba. No, that doesn't mean he knew Jango, but it gives him a very good idea as to what Jango would do. He wanted a Fett for this job because he knew he could trust the true Mandalor (yes, I know that's spelled wrong, I was sick when I wrote this, deal please).

As always, thank you SO MUCH to my amazing Beta Readers, Khalthar and Carradee. You guys are amazing!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Count Dooku watched as his friend's body burned. He'd sent word back to the Temple via a network he'd set up years ago, so there would at least be record of Syfo's death. Now, all he could do was bear witness of the Jedi Master's passing. The former Jedi clutched Qui-gon's rock in one hand and just looked on, letting the flames overtake his vision. The darkness of Serenno's beautiful forest grew around him, the noises of the evening rising and falling like a symphony of sorrow.

He'd gone over everything that had happened again... and had come to one major conclusion – Palpatine was more involved in this than he wanted Dooku to know about. It wasn't terribly surprising, but it was rather terrifying. He had no proof, only his gut to tell him that something wasn't what it seemed here. Not with how the dark side worked according to Lars. Not with how neatly the Count had been set up to find Syfo... and he had been set up. He could see it now. It was just too coincidental, too convenient and too vague to be anything other than a planned occurrence.

And if Palpatine could plan this far ahead...

Dooku could see the writing on the wall. He'd Fall. There was no way around it now. Not unless he was willing to fake his own death and just get out of all of it... and he wasn't. He couldn't. In all honesty, he could see himself Falling after abandoning his self-appointed task just as easily as if he stayed. But, while he'd resisted so far, if he remained, well, Palpatine had something else set up – probably several things, and there really was only so much Dooku could do to fight it. He was already losing... he could feel it.

So he had two choices: he could resist it and crash down *hard*... or he could embrace it and see if he could control it somehow.

A controlled Fall... was that even possible?

In the morning, he'd send out his request and beg for help if he had to, because it was a matter of his pride and his soul in exchange for the rest of the universe. And he knew what he would choose... what he'd already chosen.

Taking a deep breath, he walked up to the pyre, watching the dying embers as the hastily gathered wood crumbled and fell.

"I will do it, my friend. I will save the universe... or as much of it as I can. I will not let your sacrifice go to waste. I am just... sorry," if his voice cracked a little, there was no one around to hear it, "you got dragged into the middle of this. I will miss you, my friend."

He placed the flowers he'd had in the hand not clutching Qui-gon's rock on the pyre. It was a local custom to honor the dead, and one he found very fitting.

For a moment, he almost felt as if Syfo's hand rested on his shoulder and he closed his eyes, thanking his friend before bidding him goodbye. Then he nodded to the two people standing at the edge of the clearing. Servants of his household who would take care of the fire, see that it got properly extinguished and buried.

Then he turned to head back to his mansion. He had a lot to prepare before he returned to Coruscant.

xXx

Anakin spent the night in the healer's wing, and honestly, he wasn't upset at being there for once. Siri sat with him for a while, just doing some of her own research and work. Anakin made some attempts at classwork, but ended up just lying on the bed, not really seeing anything. Siri didn't speak, but he was grateful for that because he wasn't sure he could bring himself to talk yet.

It had been so simple. Just a little thing (albeit of a very monumental memory). Just a couple of seconds to take him right back almost to where he'd come from. Maybe not anger wise, but depression wise... most definitely.

After dinner, Aakin went back to laying and staring, just letting his mind lethargically come to its own conclusions about everything that had happened, processing and trying to figure out what was and wasn't true.

Not a half-hour later, a padawan healer came in carefully, knocking on the door and peeking in.

"Initiate Skywalker? You have some guests who would like to see you. Are you up for them?"

Anakin blinked at him, wondered if he could speak yet, decided that he probably could but didn't want to, so he looked over to Siri. She got what he'd wanted to ask and nodded to him before turning to the padawan.

"Who is it?" she asked.

The padawan looked a little confused.

"Some of his... er, your fellow initiates."

Anakin appreciated the padawan continuing to try and address him instead of Siri. So he smiled at the padawan, then thought for a few moments. Then he nodded, turning to Siri again.

"As long as it isn't for more than a couple of minutes," she said. "Would you mind coming in and checking after fifteen or twenty minutes and ushering them out if necessary?"

The padawan blinked, looked between the two of them and smiled. "Of course. I'll show them in."

The initiate nodded while Siri said, "Thank you."

As soon as he left, Siri turned to Anakin, expression serious. "Are you sure you're up for this?" she asked.

Anakin opened his mouth, but then closed it and shrugged. *I don't know,* he thought, hoping that the two of them were close enough that she'd understand through their bond. He'd be lucky if she could really get the nuances at all. He was sure it couldn't happen if she was more than a couple of feet away.

Thankfully, again, she must have gotten the jist, because she sighed. "Anakin, it's okay if you don't want to see them."

He shook his head. *But I do. And I know they worry, and this will help them know I'm alright...*

She didn't look convinced. "You can't even speak to them."

I can, he protested. She raised a skeptical eyebrow. *I... just don't... I don't know.*

She rolled her eyes upwards, as if praying for patience. "Fine, I'll help you out. But you realize this will perpetuate the 'master/padawan' rumor around us."

Anakin actually scoffed. *As if you just being here hasn't done that already.*

She conceded the point with a quick tilt of her head and went to put her things away. Anakin thought about asking her what she was doing, but ultimately decided that he didn't really care at the moment.

A couple of minutes later, the door opened and a familiar group of initiates hesitantly walked in, led, of course, by Hik'te. Maelee, as usual, was on his right followed by Tru, Darra, Thorran, Hale and Coira, the only padawan currently (although Anakin gave it a couple of months, maximum, before Tru and Darra were picked) in their little group.

"Anakin!" Hik'te said as he ran up to the bed. Everyone gathered around and Anakin had to back away a little. They were initiates, but there were a lot of them, and for a moment he felt some panic rise.

"Alright," Siri said sternly, "back away, and give him some room." A little shamefaced, they did so, shooting him apologetic glances.

Siri's expression softened and she smiled at them. "I am Knight Siri Tachi, for those of you who don't know." Several of the children looked as if they'd just made a connection. Of course, Anakin made it no secret that he knew this particular knight. This was the first time most of them had met her, though. "Anakin's lost his voice, but we have a communication system going. So, speak to him, and I'll speak for him, alright?"

More than a few pairs of eyes widened, but they nodded obediently.

"So, you're sick?" Coira asked worriedly.

Anakin nodded, although he gave her a significant look.

"He lost his voice while in his healing session today," Siri explained. "He should be getting it back soon, but just in case we're keeping him here tomorrow."

Coira looked relieved and Maelee looked suspicious at that. If the others knew there was something going on between them (likely Hale had noticed) no one said anything.

"Is there anything we can do for you, Ani?" Tru asked. "Get your schoolwork? Get you something you would need to sleep? Anything from your room?"

Anakin thought about that for a moment, then he looked at Siri.

She nodded. "The schoolwork will be great," she said. "His teachers will likely ask you to bring him some things anyway."

"I'll be in charge of that," Maelee said, voice full of cool confidence.

"Other than that, just coming here to visit him helps," Siri said to them, offering them a smile. Anakin did as well, nodding emphatically.

"We were really worried when you didn't come to dinner – this is the second night in a row, and you didn't even text us," Hik'te said, almost reprovingly.

Anakin's smile turned apologetic.

"He didn't mean to make you worry, Hik'te," the knight said.

"Then he should take better care of himself," the blue-skinned boy said back to her.

Siri raised an eyebrow at him before turning her look onto Anakin. "I agree."

Anakin frowned at her. He did not pout. He didn't. The kids did snicker though.

"How about we all try and poke him into taking better care of himself, huh?" Siri asked the initiates.

"Yeah," they said together.

Anakin just sighed. *How is this my life?* Children *are trying to take care of me. I'd like to remind you that I'm a former Jedi General.*

"Oh, you were never that highly ranked and you know it," Siri responded.

The former Sith's eyebrows shot up. Had she just...?

"Ranked in what?" Darra asked curiously.

Siri smiled at her. "Lightsaber training."

Anakin rolled his eyes again. Good save though.

"But I thought he was the best," True said.

"For his age group."

That seemed to work for them as they nodded. Anakin still sent Siri the stink eye. She just shrugged.

You're getting reckless again.

"Am I?" she asked aloud. "Master... er, Adi will be happy to hear that."

Before they could do anything else, though, the padawan from before came in. A little earlier than they'd asked, but Anakin was fine with that. "Alright, that's enough for now. Initiate Skywalker needs his rest."

Aw," the initiates (and one padawan) said simultaneously.

"You can come and see him again tomorrow."

They agreed, albeit reluctantly, and Anakin couldn't help but feel a little warmer for their care.

"Night, Ani!" they said as they left.

"See you tomorrow," Coira promised before being herded out the door.

Then he and Siri sat in the suddenly very quiet room – it seemed almost too still after all the hubbub, even if it hadn't been for very long.

"Well," Siri said ruefully, "you seem to have quite the following this time around."

They didn't know me as 'The Chosen One' or 'the apprentice to the Sith Killer'. I was just the late-comer. That helped.

Siri frowned. "Was it really that bad, the first time around?"

I'd like to say definitively either way, but I'm not sure my memories are... reliable. To be fair, I also had to deal with all the grooming and poisoning from Sidious, plus my duties as a padawan...

Siri sighed. "You really were just set up for failure, weren't you."

Anakin smiled grimly.

"Anyway, you're supposed to take tomorrow easy."

The former Sith groaned aloud.

"Oh, look! You said something."

Anakin shot her a glare.

She held up her hands. "Sorry, sorry. Do you want me to stay?"

He sighed. *You can if you want, but don't feel obligated.*

Siri nodded, studying him for a bit. "How about I go run some errands and come back before bed to check on you?"

Anakin nodded and waved her off with his hand.

"See you in a few," she said as she walked out the door.

xXx

Obi-wan and Ferus stopped by after that. It was awkward, they couldn't seem to understand everything he was saying, though Obi-wan did far better than Ferus. They both wished him well and let him know they were going on a mission and didn't know how long they'd be gone for.

Anakin nodded and thanked them mentally.

"You're welcome," Obi-wan had said as he ushered his padawan out the door. "May the Force be with you."

You as well, Anakin thought to them, hoping Obi-wan got the gist of it at least. He doubted it would be as clear as it would have been in the other timeline, or even as clear as he and Siri seemed to be able to think when in close enough proximity, but if Obi-wan understood at all, it would be enough.

His last visitor was a very tired, very grumpy torgruta youngling.

"I thought you said you wouldn't do that anymore," she said angrily when her escort, another padawan, showed her in.

He sighed. *Sorry, Snips. I thought I could handle it... and I did, but...*

"It didn't feel like you did," she objected. The escort blinked, having not been privy to his thought-speech. Anakin was a little surprised

himself, but figured he shouldn't be once he thought about it.

I know. But I promise, I did.

She still frowned at him, huffing as she walked up to his bed and reached for him to help her up. He did so. It took her a few seconds to get situated, but then she sat down in front of him and studied him intensely.

For the first time in a while, she seemed hesitant. "Did... did you really kill them all?" she asked, voice so quiet he could barely hear her.

Anakin's heart stuttered to a stop as he looked into her disappointed, blue eyes.

"You saw that?" he breathed, horrified. And, as he had feared, the tentative, fragile peace he had gained broke that fast. As soon as he spoke, he felt as if he'd shattered yet again.

She bit her lip and nodded.

He found himself scooting away from her desperately, trying not to panic as he backed up against the wall. "How... how can you be near me?" he asked.

"Oh, you're speaking," the padawan at the door said, sounding uncomfortable. "I'll go let the healers know."

Right, just leave the completely unstable kid alone with the five-year-old. Great idea. And yet, he couldn't seem to make himself say anything.

Ahsoka looked confused. "But you won't hurt me. Not like you did them."

Anakin drew his knees up to his chest, still hating his prepubescent body and its ridiculous reactions. Because that's what it had to be. There was no way a grown adult would act like this... right?

He couldn't look at her as he clutched his knees to his chest, trying not to shake and failing miserably.

"But I did," he whispered. "I did... and I... I am *so sorry*, Ahsoka. I'm a terrible master."

The betrayal in her eyes returned. "You hurt me?" she asked.

Anakin nodded. "That's... that's what the cold does if I don't take care of it. It hurts other people... other people I care for a great deal. And... I cannot apologize enough. I know you can't remember, but if I could take it back, Ahsoka, I would. I *promise* I would."

She frowned at him, looking at him as if she didn't know what to make of him. He didn't blame her.

But then, she got up and crawled over to him. He blinked.

"Ahsoka... what ar—"

He cut off as she threw her arms around him. "Then I'll keep you warm."

He didn't initially know how to react to that. He sat there in shock before relaxing into the embrace. It felt as if the broken pieces of his soul were softening, melting together and finally beginning to reform again. It wasn't perfect – not even close – but it was better than it had been. Her blind faith in him, her utter belief in him, and even her love for him – he could feel it. She'd adopted him as an older brother and that very realization was a balm to his soul.

Trying not to cry again, he turned and put his arms around her, burying his head into her shoulder.

"Yeah," he whispered, his voice harsh but happier than it had any right to be. "Yeah, you will."

He didn't know if she could, but she was definitely helping.

His life was blessed because he had her in it. This little miracle of a girl. She just patted his back like she'd probably been patted, letting him know it would be alright.

When Siri came back a few moments later, looking worried and confused, she found the two of them like that. It just about melted her heart.

So she took out her comm and snapped a holo-picture really quickly. Then a couple more for good measure.

It wasn't blackmail if she was going to use it to help pull him out of his personal pits.

xXx

He spent the next day wanting to get out of the healer's wing. It was nice to know that things had returned to normal, for the most part. Hik'te and Maelee had dropped off all of his classwork earlier that morning. He finished it quickly and was just about as bored as he possibly could be when Healer Che finally stopped by and brusquely released him. She let him go with a stern warning that if he relapsed, he needed to come back, and if he even *thought* about skipping out or trying to get through it on his own... She didn't have to finish the sentence.

She could be scarier than Sidious at times.

He thanked her, assured her he would if he did (a lie, no matter how scary she was) and booked it out of there like the Emperor himself was on his tail. His friends seemed awfully glad to see him and he thanked them for all their help and support.

Of course, he sneaked out that night to go racing. He could only take so much calm.

He and Bleersh decided that he should race every circuit that night, seeing as he'd missed so many racing nights recently. Anain had happily agreed, even if he did have to lose a couple to keep people off of his tail.

Getting back to the Temple was no longer an issue, and it didn't look like anyone was after him, so he happily got back to his clan very early in the morning, but seeing as he'd been sleeping on and off all day, he figured there shouldn't be an issue.

He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

xXx

Jango sat on the *Slave I* and glared at the picture before him. It had not been easy to get the picture without everyone knowing, but he'd managed. It was the picture of a little boy holding a small animal in one hand and a wrench in the other with grease stains all over his face. It was a cute picture of a child about eight standard years old or so. It was also the picture of a boy who had been taken to the Jedi Temple, at an age far older than normal.

No one in the family had heard of a 'Luke Lars', even if their last name was 'Lars'. So what was the connection between Luke Lars and Anakin Skywalker? Shmi had been more than happy to speak of her son. She was proud of him, and while wary of Jango, she also didn't think there

could be much harm in a mother being happy for her son. She'd spoken vaguely, but it had been enough. Or it should have... if he could only figure out the blasted connection.

The only thing he could really think of was that Luke Lars knew Anakin Skywalker, and once he'd found out (somehow) that she didn't really want to leave Tatooine, Luke Lars had changed his list. Except, there were too many coincidences. The names, the backgrounds... two former slaves brought in at an age where they were old enough to remember, both related to the 'Lars'...

He just couldn't see how else they could be related. But his gut told him there was *something* there. Something he was missing.

Frustrated, Jango brought up a picture he'd taken of Luke Lars, sitting at a cafe table and drinking something from under his mask. Then he put the two holopics up next to each other, not knowing what good that would...

Wait.

He enlarged Luke Lars' image. Jango knew of at least four species off the top of his head who had proportions like that... but... what if...

Could it be?

Could it really be?

Would a kid be that intelligent? That cunning? That manipulative?

He looked back and forth between the photos, then let out a string of curses in mando'a.

Shutting off the coms, he set his course for Coruscant. He had a Jedi trainee to confront.

Chapter End Notes

*AN: I'd like to point out that I haven't seen season 3 or 4 of Rebels. I know Ahsoka survives, but I never quite knew how and just... don't have the time to watch it and figure it out. Sorry. I also think that it lends more credence to Anakin right now if he really did kill her, so think of this as mildly AU.

As a side note, Obi-wan also saw Anakin's memory as a dream... and 'dreams pass'. He really passed it off as a nightmare and

didn't think much about it, other than that he found it very disturbing and disquieting.

So, someone complained that the story was dragging. Well, while this should pick up soon, I'll warn you that this work is one of those that has to have everything in place, and once it goes, it'll go fast. The pace isn't going to change any time soon. SorryNotSorry.

I still appreciate the feedback, though. Merry Christmas (or whatever you choose to celebrate, I hope it's great)!

Thank you again to Carradee and Khalthar!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Master Yaddle had a private lesson with Anakin right before his session with Master Xio the day after he'd initially been scheduled to go back to the senate. She hadn't lost her interest in Anakin's new way of meditation. Or perhaps it was an old way, re-imagined? He wasn't sure, but he couldn't have been the only one to try and meditate like this.

In all honesty, learning to meditate using his lighter emotions, while not necessarily as easy as using his darker emotions, had helped him when it came to regular Jedi meditation, and he'd been able to get to medium levels of trances in recent months. He still couldn't achieve a large-scale battle meditation or a healing trance, but he was finding his ability to use the Force growing once again.

Or at least it had been. That particular session had been nothing but a series of failures. Of course, after Anakin's mental and emotional regression over the last few days, he was probably pretty lucky he was able to reach any trances at all with normal Jedi meditation.

Even his ability to focus with lighter emotions had been compromised, which he found particularly frustrating because after last week he'd actually been making leaps and bounds of improvement. Having to go back to where he'd been over a year before went beyond disheartening. And, naturally, he wasn't taking that calmly.

Kriffing Sith tendencies.

"Hmm, stop we should," Yaddle finally said after a half-an-hour of almost no progress. "Frustrated, you are. Little more good can we do today."

Anakin let out a grunt, half to show his agreement, half to show his frustration.

Yaddle raised an eyebrow at him, frowning. "Much you have gone through recently, yes? Be so hard on yourself, you should not. Patience, young one."

The former Sith Lord scoffed as he slouched and put his head in his

hands. "Because I have all the time in the world. There's only a psychopathic Sith Lord who has far too much power that just keeps growing bent on controlling and subjugating and destroying the galaxy as we know it. Not to mention, the Jedi." He was glad they'd let her in on the secret for the most part. Keeping all of this from her would not have helped him at the moment, especially as he was really trying not to just throw his power around like Vader would have.

Yaddle tipped her head to one side. "Thought, I did, that care about the Republic, you did not."

Anakin blinked at her for a couple of seconds. He hadn't realized she'd caught on to that as it wasn't an opinion he liked to parade. He also noticed that she'd skipped over the Jedi altogether. Perceptive. After a couple more moments of study, he deflated a little.

"No, I don't. The Republic is corrupt and far too easily manipulated. Many of its policies are outdated and useless to say the least, outright harmful to say the worst, and it leaves itself open to those who simply want power and are clever enough to work around the obstacles."

The diminutive master nodded, although he figured it was more from understanding than agreement. "Have an alternative, do you? A solution... hmm?"

Anakin slumped just a little more. He'd discussed this very opinion with multiple people often back before the Empire. He'd had many opinions, and they'd all been naive, short-sighted and foolish.

"I used to think I did. Now I see that I did not. I'm not sure there *is* a solution. All forms of government are too easily corruptible. Someone somewhere will always be hurt or at a disadvantage depending on the people in power, and it will benefit others. I don't see a way around it. Although," he shot her a wry look, "I'm pretty sure that handing it over to the Sith Master is the worst 'solution' possible."

"Right there, you are," the older master said with a nod.

Anakin sighed. "I suppose you're going to tell me that whatever government helps the most people is the best one." Despite the people that left being dragged down to the bottom most rungs.

Yaddle seemed to think on that for a moment, then she shook her head. "Think, I do, that best, it is, when change their situation, a people can."

The former Sith's brow furrowed slightly as he puzzled over her words. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged and stood. "When arise, a problem does, if address it, a government allows, then good, a government is."

"But,"—Anakin shook his head—"there's so much potential for abuse in an organized party like that. People will inevitably bring up, change and address things for the worse just as often as they change things for the better."

"Wrong, you are not," she conceded. She didn't otherwise do or say anything, simply waiting for Anakin as she rested on her staff.

"So... you think the ability to choose and change is more important than peace?" he asked, now thoroughly confused.

"If forced into peace, one is, treasure it, will they?"

Anakin looked down at his hands as he contemplated that. "I... suppose not."

"But if chosen, peace is..."

"Then they'll fight for it," Anakin concluded, almost to himself as he hadn't ever contemplated it like that before. "Or at least work to preserve it. But, doesn't that mean that they'd need to know more about war and battle and pain to really understand and get to a point where they'd choose it?"

"Perhaps," Yaddle said with a passive wave of her hand. "But learn from others' mistakes, many can."

"But some can't..."

"Hmm. Can't, you say? Or won't?"

Anakin didn't answer. He was sure that there would be people who quite literally couldn't choose peace, for one reason or another, and yet...

"The ability to choose; precious above all other gifts, this is."

He wasn't sure he quite agreed with that, but as a former slave, he could certainly see where she was coming from.

"In any case, done, you are, for today. Go to greet Master Xio, you

should. Then, relax. Rest, you need, I think."

"Yes," Anakin replied absently, then shook his head and bowed to the master. "Thank you for your help, Master Yaddle."

"Happy to help, I am," Yaddle said with a smile. "Think on our talk, you should. Come up with your own solution, you will. Faith, I have, in you. See you next week, I will."

With that, she bowed to the initiate and shuffled out of the room. Anakin just watched her go. She'd had some interesting points, even if he wasn't sure he could entirely agree with them.

"Good evening," he said after her, then went about gathering his own things, before heading off to Master Xio's.

xXx

"So,"—the older woman looked at Anakin a little warily after they'd gotten seated—"a dream?"

Anakin winced. "Yes."

She frowned and cocked her head to one side. "Are you... up for talking about it, or should we discuss something else?"

Unlike before, with Girth, Anakin really thought about her question and about everything he'd been through in the last couple of days. If he said 'no', they'd move on to another topic and he wouldn't have to touch that particularly painful wound. If he said 'yes'... would that be too much? After everything? After knowing that his mind-healers wouldn't judge him, and that Ahsoka and Siri, his friends and even Obi-Wan and Ferus were there for him *despite* it all...

Well, he had to rephrase that in his mind as most of them didn't really *know*. Siri most certainly did. Girth (and by extension, Master Xio) did in this particular instance, as did Ahsoka. Coira, Yaddle and Yoda knew the basics, but no recent details (although he had little doubt the Masters could fill in those details themselves). He even suspected that Mace and a couple of the other Council members knew more than they were letting on... but...

"I... don't want the Council to hear about this," he said softly.

Master Xio nodded gravely. "I can agree to that, if I can tell Master Yoda. Or you can, if you'd prefer."

Anakin outright cringed that time. "Does he... already know about what I told Girth?"

She sighed and nodded again. "That was part of the original deal, and you didn't specify not to. I'm not sure it even occurred to Girth to not tell, seeing as Master Yoda's been so involved in your treatment so far."

Part of that made Anakin feel a little sick. Part of that seemed to lift a burden from his shoulders. He wasn't sure how he could feel both relieved and worried about the same thing simultaneously.

"Then... I don't think..." He took a breath and then shook his head. "Not today."

She nodded. "Alright. Just keep in mind that you'll be going back to the Senate next week. Do you think you'll be able to talk about it after that while confronting him still?"

Anakin bit his lip. It was a good point. They may have to wait until well after he'd finished the program before he could speak about it. Or... maybe he'd be fine. He wasn't sure. He was pretty sure that he wasn't up for it now.

"No," he said with a sigh, "But I... really can't, right now."

She simply nodded. "I understand. When you are ready to talk, we'll discuss it.

"Until then, I have a couple of other things I've written down that we can discuss today. Or you can bring up something yourself, if you'd like."

"I... did run into a padawan I tended to... butt heads with in my previous life, the other day."

Master Xio looked interested. "Oh?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes. He's... also Obi-Wan's new padawan."

The older woman blinked. "Ferus Olin?" she asked.

It was Anakin's turn to look surprised. "You know him?"

"Well, Obi-Wan has become my patient."

The former Sith blinked at her for several seconds. "Since when?"

She smirked. "Yesterday, actually."

"And he... came to you? Or he was ordered?" Anakin asked slowly.

"He came to me on Siri's recommendation. He said that he needed to learn to be healthier so he could teach his padawan correctly. He also gave me permission to share that with you if it came up."

That... didn't sound like Anakin's old master.

"Who is he and what has he done with Obi-Wan?" Anakin heard himself asking.

Master Xio looked amused and a little sad. "He wouldn't have done that in your previous life?"

Anakin shook his head firmly. "Obi-Wan *despises* the healers' wing with about as much passion as a Jedi can have. He hates being here and... I think he hates admitting that he needs help at all. He'd prefer to just push through it and solve everyone else's problems first."

The Jedi Master nodded. "I got a similar sense from him. He was extremely uncomfortable and I got the feeling that he wouldn't have been here if he'd had any other choice."

"I'm surprised Siri convinced him that he didn't." Because wow. It just... blew his mind. Obi-Wan... in mind-healing... *willingly*... He really wasn't sure what to think of that just because it never would have happened in his memories.

"Well, we aren't here to talk about Obi-Wan..."—she paused—"unless you want to. You did mention his padawan?"

Anakin shook his head, coming back to himself. "Yes. So, I was training in the salles the other evening, and as I was closing up..."

So he told her about his encounter with Ferus. He wasn't even sure why he wanted to talk about it, except that the subject wouldn't be about his horrible dreams or Palpatine. It didn't take him long to finish, and once he did, he sat back in his chair.

Master Xio nodded at him, looking far happier than she had before. "It sounds like you helped him quite a bit... although I do have to warn you against making predictions or diagnosis until you've taken classes and have been given permission from your teacher to do so."

Anakin nodded. "I understand. You have my apologies."

Xio waved it away. "Just keep it in mind for the future. You didn't know better. Besides, I'm proud of you for going out of your way to help someone else – someone you don't seem to like."

The former Sith folded his arms. "I don't hate him."

"That isn't what I said, is it?" the older master said with an amused smile and raised eyebrow.

Anakin didn't answer. He decided to move on to something else he'd realized while speaking with Ferus and Siri the previous week.

"I'm coming to see more and more that the Jedi aren't what I thought they were... even after living with them for over a decade. I don't understand how I could have missed so much about how sapient they are. I mean, I *knew* they were imperfect, but they still constantly disappointed me. At one point, I knew that didn't make them evil, per se, but as Vader..." He sighed, shaking his head slowly.

"It can be difficult to let go of an ideal, especially when it pertains to someone else. That attitude also fits in with the Emotional Regulation Disorder we've been working on. Extremes in ideals, even if you know they don't really apply."

"Yet more proof," he muttered. At Master Xio's puzzled expression, Anakin snorted. "Only Sith deal in black and white."

She looked genuinely shocked. "Who told you that?"

Anakin shrugged. "Obi-Wan... after I'd fallen and when we were fighting on Mustafar."

"Musta... Wait." She held up a finger. "Is this one of those instances where you won't be able to talk about it right now?"

Anakin nodded apologetically.

A sigh. "Anakin, I... don't think that's true. I know far too many people – some of whom are Jedi – who see the world as they want, and others who refuse to see any middle ground. They must be handled cautiously, but they exist simply because sapients, as a whole, tend to err on the side of caution and would much rather find an area they can be sure is safe or right, not realizing that there will always be exceptions and extremes that stray too far."

The former Sith Lord thought about that for a moment before nodding. "I believe I understand your point, and I can agree."

The woman smiled. "I'm glad, although you don't have to agree with me, you know."

Anakin smirked at her. "Yes, I do know."

"Good."

They fell into quiet for a few moments, with Master Xio checking over some notes. Then Anakin spoke again.

"Those people who only see things in black and white... a lot of them are children, aren't they."

Master Xio looked surprised by the question. "Many of them, yes. Children's minds are still developing and sometimes simply can't grasp the nuances that an adult can. Some brains never fully develop, or they over develop and those people simply cannot grasp some things that someone else in their shoes would. That's one possible source of autism.

"Why do you ask?"

"I... just used to think, before I came to the Temple, that the Jedi were these perfect defenders of the galaxy. I'm not sure I ever really dropped that ideal... and I'm not the only child to think that way. Even Jedi children seem to want that to be true."

Xio blinked. "Wanting the Order to be like that and thinking the Order is like that are two different things, even if there can be overlap. And I suppose that Jedi younglings, of all children, hear stories of Jedi heroes. It can be difficult to realize that ones heroes are sapient and have flaws – sometimes very painful and damaging ones."

Anakin sighed, thinking of Coira and her intense desire to just make everything good and light and wholesome. "Those who can't realize the gray areas – who can't change... they don't make good Jedi, I don't think."

The mind healer frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"It's too easy to disappoint them. Then they become disillusioned at best, and can Fall at worst. It's almost like their own bright light drives them into darkness, and when they fall, they fall hard."

"Like you did?" Xio asked softly.

Anakin nodded grimly.

The older woman frowned again. "You're worried about someone in particular, aren't you. Ferus?"

He felt a half-smile come to his lips. "A little. But I was thinking more about your padawan. She reminds me so much of... well... me that it's a little frightening."

That seemed to surprise Xio. "Coira is... very optimistic," she said slowly, "and I know she's having trouble adjusting, but I don't think she's in danger of Falling. And, to be fair, she doesn't have a Dark Lord of the Sith grooming her to become his next apprentice."

"No," Anakin replied, "but she does talk to one on a regular basis."

Xio's frown deepened. "You aren't a Sith anymore. You said so yourself."

Anakin's expression turned wry. "I'm not much of a Jedi either. I don't believe in the Order, I don't really believe in the Republic... Maybe I have it wrong, and it's the pragmatic members of the Order who drive the lighter ones who see things in black and white down." Like Obi-Wan had driven him down? No, more like everyone else had. The Obi-Wan from Anakin's teenage memories still seemed like the epitome of Jedi, even now. How much of a facade had that been? He suddenly wondered.

"Anakin," Xio said with a frown, bringing him out of his reverie, "do you feel like you're dragging people into darkness?"

His brow furrowed as he thought about her question. "If I am," he finally answered, "I do not mean to. But then, I suppose that other pragmatic Jedi could be the same. I wouldn't exactly call myself a beacon of the light side anymore, am I. And I don't seem to be the only one in the order, currently... ironically."

"You don't think you're bringing anyone down?" she asked again, apparently wanting him to answer more clearly.

His lips thinned. "I honestly don't know. I would hope if I were that someone like Siri or Master Yaddle or Master Yoda or you or Girth would be able to point it out to me... so I would lean towards 'no'. At least not through the Force. I could definitely be one of those

pragmatic Force-users who drives people away from the light, though."

She shook her head. "If that were really true, every person with a sunny disposition would end up cynical and/or depressed whenever they met someone with a different opinion. While it's not unheard of for such mind-sets to sway over time, I do think it's more a matter of support and preparation. I know your master *tried* to prepare you, but he didn't know what he had to fight against. You didn't have the support you needed, and what you did have was very harshly, if subtly, undermined."

"So Palpatine's the reason why I was so convinced everyone else was so perfect? And I just wasn't?"

Xio nodded. "Partially. He did have you convinced that you were different but above the rules, didn't he?"

Anakin couldn't help but feel annoyed that they'd gotten back to talking about Palpatine. The one topic he'd like to avoid.

"Yes. Although I didn't need much encouragement. Besides, the Jedi were the ones who told me I was The Chosen One."

"So he took an idea you already had and twisted it."

"It seems to be his M.O."

The mind healer sighed. "Effective."

Anakin smirked a little, even if it wobbled a bit. "And pragmatic."

"Pragmatism doesn't mean darkness."

"It doesn't exactly scream light either."

"No," she conceded. "But it does scream survival."

Anakin thought about that, then let out a deep breath. "I wish I could be more optimistic and less pragmatic."

Xio's smile was sad. "Many people would prefer to deal more with our higher needs revolving around happiness than our lower ones dealing more with survival. But, to be fair, I don't think you're as 'pragmatic' as you think you are."

A couple of moments of silence. "I... hope you're right."

The master's smile became far more real. "That's the spirit."

xXx

Anakin was glad Xio hadn't pushed him for details of his dreams. They'd instead gone over more philosophy for the rest of the session, and Anakin now had several things to think about that didn't dredge up the horrors of his past.

Now, he strolled into the training halls yet again, searching for Siri. She should be there...

Ah, there she was.

He walked over to one of the longer rooms where she was going through her lightsaber forms. A couple of other Jedi were going through their own forms in the room, but there would definitely be enough room for a minor duel if they were willing to keep his true skill from being observed (he felt they'd done a fairly good job and hoped no one had seen how much he'd improved – the last thing he needed was more attention).

"Knight Tachi," he called to her as he walked in. She finished her kata and turned to him.

"What happened to 'Siri'?" she asked.

He thumbed over his shoulder at the other knights, both radiating amusement for some reason.

"Ah," she replied with a nod of her head. Then she gestured to the empty space beside her. "Care to join me?"

Anakin nodded, falling into a couple of stretches to begin warming up. Siri turned her lightsaber back on and began to go through the next form.

"How long do you think it will be before they try and tell me to stop coming down here so often again?" Anakin asked.

Siri raised an eyebrow as she looked over at him without missing a beat in her current form. "The Initiate Council? Or the High Council?"

"Either," Anakin replied.

"Well, you've already tested out of so many classes and subjects... I think they're scrambling with you a bit, Anakin. If you have free time

but are using it well, I doubt they'll say anything."

"I do think it's a little ridiculous that I can't take higher-placed classes until I'm a padawan, but I also understand why. Doesn't mean it's any less frus—"

He cut off as a ping from his comm went off. He glanced at Siri who shrugged, somehow still keeping up with her form. So he dug his comm out of his pocket and began to scroll through it.

When he hadn't moved several minutes later, Siri finally came over to see what had him so enthralled.

"Anakin?" she asked.

He just turned a pale face up to her and showed her the holo message.

"Isn't that the message board..." she faded off and her own eyes widened. "Oh..."

"Dooku wants to meet. He said it was an emergency."

Siri stared at the message for several seconds. From Tyra... Tyrannus. That had to be Anakin's morbid idea of an inside joke.

"Do you want to go?" she asked.

Anakin looked down at the holocomm again. "I... don't know. I must admit I am... curious to see his mental state, and yet..."

"It's dangerous," she replied softly.

"Yes," the former Sith replied, his tone matching hers. "I have no idea how far he's fallen or what he's doing for Palpatine..."

"Then let me go."

Anakin jumped a little. "What? No!"

She raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"It's Tyrannus! One of the best duelists to come out of the Jedi Order, full stop."

"And?"

He scowled at her. "This is no time to suddenly get reckless," he

hissed.

She held out her hand. "Hi, Kettle. I'm Pot."

He was sure his expression should have sucked the air in the room as dry as Tatooine's. "I am glad you find yourself so amusing."

She shrugged. "I've always been a little reckless, Anakin. I've also been bored staying cooped up here recently. Plus... what does the Force tell you?"

Anakin opened his mouth to argue, but then paused and closed it again because she was right. It was nudging him to agree. And he was curious...

He threw his hands up in the air. "Fine. We'll go and meet him." Then he turned and stalked towards the door of the room. "This will require some planning," he called back without turning around.

"Be right there, oh wise one," she called after him as she shut off her lightsaber hurried to fall into step beside him.

The other Jedi looked after them for a moment, amused, before returning to their own practice.

Chapter End Notes

AN: A huge thanks to Quathis who has let me bounce ideas off of him day in and day out for weeks as I try to figure this out. You'd think this would get easier to figure out people's psyche as you go along. Even characters. It doesn't.

Also, I'd like to thank Carradee and Khalthar for their everlasting support. You guys don't know how much you mean to me or to this fic.

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone who has read and/or favortied this fic or any in this series. Thank you.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They set up the meeting with Dooku for a couple of days later, received their confirmation and went about planning. The place they'd arranged to meet at was another bar as that had worked rather well last time. Siri volunteered to scope the place out and even managed to figure out how she could infiltrate the establishment. She wouldn't give specifics to Anakin, but he suspected it had to do with liberal mind-tricking, slicing and some possible plans of sleep suggestions. She'd make first contact (not that Dooku would know if it all went according to plan) and be there with her hidden lightsaber in case anything happened.

Anakin insisted that he not go in bugged so they could check more easily for listening or recording devices on Dooku (which Siri would discreetly do, several times, most likely), and that was only if they both decided to go through with the actual meeting at all. If they saw him and got *any* inkling from the Force that something was up, they'd get out of there as quickly as they could. Anakin decided he wouldn't even put on his appendage extensions (which he'd have to build new ones soon, he was rapidly outgrowing his original ones) until he got the all-clear from Siri.

They spent the next two days getting everything they needed ready, and Anakin rediscovered for the umpteenth time that he very much liked having a project to focus on. He knew he needed to consciously process everything that had happened the past week, and he did work on it some, but he also found that when he let his mind dwell on it all, he tended to get stuck in a slowly spiraling thought-process. It hadn't quite managed to drag him down yet, but he knew it still had the potential to do so if he wasn't careful. It all really boiled down to the fact that he did not want to explain his actions as a Sith to Yoda, Xio and Girth. In all honesty, it terrified him. Sure, they hadn't abandoned him yet, but he could just see Yoda's drooping ears, Girth's horror and Xio's shock. He'd already explained some of his actions to Girth, and indirectly to Yoda and Xio, but that was honestly just the tip of the black hole's gravity well. If anything would drive them to realize just what kind of a monster he was...

So he would think on it, ponder it, and then when he ran into the

circular thought-train, he'd go back to focusing on his upcoming, self-imposed mission instead.

It worked, and for now, he'd take it.

Siri and Anakin did decide to inform Yoda of said mission, and he gave them permission to proceed with caution, although he did want to remain updated. It was kind of amazing how different Yoda had become from his counterpart in Anakin's memories. On the surface, they'd seem similar – almost exactly the same, but Anakin still remembered the other Grandmaster telling him to embrace Padmé's death and celebrate it. He also remembered the little troll telling Anakin that there was much fear in him and disagreeing with him becoming a Jedi. The rejection still hurt a little, even though he almost couldn't imagine this Yoda doing that. Almost.

This Yoda knew what was coming and had been forced to change. This Yoda had had his views and ideals thoroughly challenged, and instead of breaking under it, he'd risen to overcome it. He hadn't just suddenly evolved, and there were still things that he and Anakin greatly disagreed on, but this was the Grandmaster who saw someone in need of help, and had decided to give that help despite the risks. This was the Grandmaster who had been initially more suspicious, and then more worried and somehow more supportive because of it. It kind of blew Anakin's mind, as he had no idea what specifically had pushed the little troll from an ancient, tired being convinced that the code would be the Jedi's ultimate protection to a Grandmaster pushing for change and reform (albeit, slowly, from what he'd spoken of to Anakin, Siri and the mind-healers). He wasn't complaining though.

In truth, the former Sith couldn't be more grateful for the change. He'd trusted Yoda in his first life, simply because Yoda had been calm, fairly predictable and would pay attention to Anakin. The old master may not have approved of the young slave-boy joining the Order, but he'd lived by the Council's decision and done his best to include Anakin nonetheless. Still, while Anakin had trusted him, he'd never been able to truly trust *in* the Grandmaster. He'd always been reserved and had never really been able to address the hurt of rejection he'd initially felt. But now... now he found that he *could* trust in Yoda and he had no qualms in doing so – with the exception that he didn't want to ruin it by going through the gory details and painting the gruesome picture of a mind twisted by madness, grief and the dark side.

But, while the idea sickened him, it didn't repulse him like it would have in his previous life. And that, Anakin supposed, was a bit of a

miracle in and of itself. Didn't make the task he knew he would have to approach much easier, but he'd take what he could get at this point.

Yoda wished them well and asked them to do their best by Dooku. He also told them that he trusted them, and whatever happened, he believed that it would be the best outcome.

Anakin couldn't help but be touched.

The day of their meeting with Dooku, Siri left early, claiming some personal errands that Yoda backed up. He hadn't been happy about the idea of Anakin sneaking out again, but had more or less allowed it as long as Anakin was careful not to leave any openings into the Temple on his way. He assured the old Master that he wouldn't, and then went about finishing his classwork.

An hour or so before he was to meet Dooku, he slipped out of the Temple and went to his storage unit, picked up his arm and leg extensions before catching an air-taxi to the meeting place.

He ended up getting there a couple of minutes before the set time and contacted Siri.

"I'm in position," he said into his comm unit, even though his 'position' was really just a street corner where he could watch casually but disappear into a crowd if necessary.

"'*Bout time you got here,*" Siri responded.

"Have you made the target?" he asked.

"*Of course."*

A beat. "And?"

"*Just a sec..."* Another pause before Siri answered. *"Sorry, was filling someone's glass. So, he seems to be alone, and he doesn't seem to be bugged at all. He's about as calm as I remember, although he does have a few nervous ticks."*

"Does he seem... dark?" Anakin asked.

Another pause while he assumed she checked. *"No. But then, no one was able to sense the Emperor either."* They'd decided to call Palpatine that instead of by name, just in case anyone overheard them.

"He had years – decades even – of training then," Anakin pointed out.

"Not months."

"*Target has had years of training now, just with the light.*"

Despite knowing she couldn't see it, he shook his head. "It would take a while to really be able to hide darkness like that... trust me."

"*If you say so,"* she said hesitantly. *"I've already given the note to another staff member to deliver. He should be getting it... right about... now."*

Anakin nodded, despite knowing Siri couldn't see him. It really was inconvenient that they couldn't seem to make telepathy work, even through their bond, unless they were within a couple of meters, but she still should be able to feel his acknowledgment.

They'd debated on what they should write on the flimsy, and had eventually come up with one sentence. *Give me one good reason why I should believe anything you say.*

He could just imagine Dooku reading it, then repressing a sigh of frustration.

"*Oh. Look at that. He's asking a waitress for a writing implement."*

Anakin held his breath.

"*He's giving the note back... alright. I'll go meet her. See you in a few."*

While he waited for her to bring the note to him, he looked over the crowd passing by for the umpteenth time. He noticed a few people looking his way suspiciously, but glared them away. This wasn't the safest place for kids, but if he looked like he belonged there, he doubted he'd have any real problem.

He felt Siri's approach before he saw her. She stepped up beside him and he finally turned to look at her... and froze, blinking.

"Siri... *what* are you wearing?"

She raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him, done up in all sorts of makeup. It didn't *look* like Siri. Something about her nose and jaw. She also had on a *blaring* wig that faded from a dark rust color to a neon orange. It had been backcombed up several inches over her head... and that was the calmest part about her.

The most surprising thing, he supposed, was the very revealing outfit she wore. It was made of cheap, shiny material that hugged some

curves that *had* to be fake or enhanced somehow, even if he couldn't tell for sure. The skirt (if one could classify something so small as that) flared out around her hips and swayed with her every movement. Cheap or not, it certainly did what it had obviously been made to do.

"The uniform," she muttered darkly. "If you take any pictures, you won't like my revenge."

Anakin just blinked at her for several seconds. Then he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as he nodded solemnly. "I understand. The note?"

"Here," she said, eyeing him suspiciously.

The former Sith took the flimsy without reading it, nodded, and walked back down the street. "Thanks."

She didn't answer. She didn't need to. He'd get in contact with her whether he decided to go through with it or not.

It took him more than ten minutes to duck and crawl to where he felt that no one had followed him, and only then did he open the flimsy.

I regret to say, I do not have a good reason. The note started out with. *I can only say that you were right. If I am to succeed at all in my endeavors, I need your help.*

Anakin would have snorted if it hadn't been for one final word at the bottom: *Please.*

He stared at the word for several seconds. That wasn't something he would expect to hear from the man he'd gotten to know in the last couple of years, let alone Tyrannus. Neither one of them would 'stoop' to asking for help. For the Count, it was practically begging, and Anakin couldn't see the man doing so even as a cover. In all honesty, it showed more about Dooku's mind-set and desperation than anything else.

Of course, his paranoia told him to forget it all and just leave. But while listening to his gut had saved his life multiple times, it sure hadn't ultimately led him to a place where he'd wanted to be. And he was still curious...

So he closed his eyes and felt for the Force. It wasn't nudging him forward, but it also wasn't nudging him away.

Of course.

So this would be up to him.

"Stang it all," he muttered to himself as he drew his extensions out of his bag and began to put them on.

Once he finished with his disguise, he took out his comm. "Looks like I'm coming back, Siri."

He waited for her to get back to him. *"Are you sure*?"

Anakin scoffed. "No."

A longer pause. *"Alright. He is still here, but you may want to hurry. He doesn't look comfortable. Well, for Dooku."*

"On my way."

xXx

It took him far less time to get back to the bar than it had to get away, seeing as he wasn't trying to lose any potential tails. He stepped warily in, looking around the crowded room carefully. He spotted Siri over at one corner delivering some drinks and food. He was a little amazed at how well she blended in. If he hadn't already known what to look for, he wouldn't have been able to spot her.

Anakin had found Dooku as well. The former Jedi looked up and even the initiate could see that his shoulders relaxed noticeably when their eyes met. They studied each other for several seconds, Anakin feeling him out. He was surprised at what he found. The man's light had dimmed somewhat, but what remained seemed somehow firmer and stronger than before. And it was definitely light. No darkness to be found.

The former Sith let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding as he strode towards the booth Dooku sat at.

"Lars," he greeted, tersely and yet warmly. That... was strange. Dooku? Warm? It took Anakin a moment to respond.

"Dooku," he finally said. "I... have to admit, I'm pleasantly surprised."

The older man nodded his head in appreciation. That... also wasn't like him.

"And I have to admit that I also expected some gloating. Not many could have lasted this long."

Instead of smiling – smugly or otherwise – Dooku just sighed and looked down a little. "I will admit, it has not been... easy."

"I'd imagine not," Anakin agreed. Then he ventured to (slowly) ask the question that had been running through his mind. "How did you do it?"

Dooku sat back against his seat, looking suddenly tired. "All I can say is that it must be the will of the Force. Either that or I have a guardian looking out for me." And that almost blew Anakin's mind, because Dooku was many things, but superstitious was *not* one of them. He did not like how the former Jedi was somehow able to keep him off balance still.

"That implies that you have had some... close calls," Anakin spoke, still choosing his words carefully.

The gray-haired man closed his eyes for a moment, his hand going to a pouch on his belt. "You could say that."

And this had just gone so far beyond what Anakin could have possibly expected. He really didn't know where to go from here...

"So... with what do you need my help?" he finally asked, deciding to address the reason he'd come at all. "Do you want my help getting away from him?" They could fake Dooku's death fairly easily, although Anakin would have to really grill him on hiding his Force presence from darksiders.

It looked like it was Dooku's turn to choose his words carefully, which set off warning bells in Anakin's head.

"I... have thought of that, but I cannot stomach the idea of all my work and preparation and sacrifice going to waste. But, I do not think I can withstand his machinations for much longer." That tiredness somehow increased, making his shoulders slump even more, but Anakin remained tense. He still wasn't sure what the man wanted and couldn't help but be ready to bolt if necessary. He was curious, not stupid.

Dooku rubbed a hand over his face (again, too close to Obi-Wan...) before he spoke again. "If I stay with him, I believe you are right: there will be no avoiding the dark side."

Anakin *really* didn't like where this was going. He didn't speak, though, so Dooku decided to continue.

"Is... there a way to control a Fall? Fall on my terms, not his?"

It was only because Anakin had his mask on that he allowed his jaw to drop in shock. He wanted to yell and scream and ask the man before him about his sanity. Could one go insane instead of going dark when backed into a corner? Anakin had always assumed that darkness meant insanity, but it had never occurred to him that one could go insane in such a situation to *avoid* the darkness.

And yet, Dooku didn't *seem* insane... he didn't have that aura about him. Anakin had been around his share of the mentally challenged, and Dooku just didn't fit the bill. And yet, Anakin couldn't see this proposal as anything short of completely crazy.

And not in a good way.

Finally he forced himself to say something. "I... don't *think* you jest..."

Dooku shook his head. "I assure you, I do not."

Nope, he couldn't wrap his head around it.

"You are asking for the Force equivalent of a slow addiction to *death sticks,* and somehow expect me to believe you are, indeed, serious."

Somehow the Count's expression turned sad, of all things. "I am, aren't I. Well, I simply need to stay sane long enough to get you the information you require."

"And after that?"

Dooku shrugged. "I will have outlived my usefulness."

Forget being off-balance, Anakin was having a difficult time remembering which way was up at this point. "You never struck me as suicidal."

"If it is for the cause," he replied *nonchalantly*. As if this wasn't just normal, but *expected*. It occurred to him that perhaps this was how free-born felt when they saw Anakin acting on his slave-born impulses...

"What cause, exactly?" Anakin asked, needing the clarification.

Dooku raised an eyebrow and took a drink from the cup he'd had before him the entire time. "Saving the universe, of course."

Anakin just stared at him as he forced his mind to process that – to *work*, kriff it! Was Dooku really asking this? Did he expect (hope, even) that Anakin would – *could* – help somehow?

He leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "Count Dooku, we are not speaking of a mere under-cover mission any more. This is your very *soul* we are discussing, for that is what is at stake."

Dooku studied him for several seconds before nodding. "I understand that more than you realize. However, I have weighed the options and this seems to be the best solution."

Anakin scoffed. "Best solution? What could possibly be worth your eternal soul?"

The old man smiled sadly. "The Galaxy and all the souls therein."

They both sat in utter silence for almost a minute while Anakin contemplated that. Not for the first time, he wondered if he'd ever really known the man in front of him – the man who would, apparently – trade everything about himself for the betterment of others. Of course, they couldn't have known Dooku once he'd fallen, but still...

Then he remembered what Siri said about Depa – that she had a simple outlook in that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. And now that he thought about it, it was a common Jedi ideal. Almost every Jedi he'd met had, at one point, been willing to sacrifice the few (be they clones, other Jedi or – most often – themselves) for the many. Mace Windu, Luminara, Adi-Gallia, Ferus... Although he knew most of them tried to save everyone they possibly could. Obi-Wan, Plo Koon, Siri, they all worked rather tirelessly to save the many *and* the few. Somehow, even though he'd known Dooku had been a Jedi, it had never even crossed his mind that the Count, of all people, would adhere to such a self-sacrificing ideal.

And yet, Dooku was volunteering for this... at the highest personal cost possible.

Anakin's opinion of the man shot up several notches and somehow made his memories of the Sith he'd become in the other timeline even more tragic.

Finally, Dooku spoke again, his voice quiet and subdued. "I made my decision long ago, Lars. I would gladly trade my soul for the galaxy."

The former Sith remained silent for a couple seconds longer before speaking up himself. "Luke," he said through the vocoder.

Dooku blinked. "What?"

Anakin swallowed. "You know my first name. I would ask you call me by it."

The older man smirked a little. It may have been forced, but there was also some real emotion behind it. "Even if it isn't your real name?"

Well, Anakin could only shrug to that, but Dooku didn't seem to mind as he finished off his drink. Then he reached into a pocket and pulled out a mini datapad.

"With your explanations of addiction, I looked up medical procedures for how to treat someone who needs an otherwise addicting or illegal drug. Most of them deal with limited use and an inability to supply a fully-fledged addiction. Unfortunately, that isn't exactly something we can enforce to my knowledge." He raised an eyebrow in his companion's direction.

Anakin thought over the words he'd just heard carefully before nodding slowly. "Not without limiting your use of the Force at all."

Dooku nodded grimly, obviously expecting the answer. "Which would be plausible if I didn't also have to answer to Palpatine. I don't believe he knows I have returned to Coruscant, but with the resources he has at his disposal..."

The former Sith couldn't help but agree. This was Sidious, after all, and he had more active resources than most people could comprehend.

"I can likely put off going back to him for a couple of days – a week at the most – before he'd set up a confrontation."

Anakin nodded in acknowledgment, but didn't answer. Truthfully, he wasn't sure what to say. What was the right answer here? He closed his eyes again, reaching for the Force, and yet again, felt nothing. Was that, perhaps, the light and the darkness within the Force negating each other? Because this felt like a rather monumental turning point. If Mace Windu were here, he'd likely be seeing so many shatterpoints

it would give him a migraine.

He needed to get away, somewhere quiet, and really *think* on it. Meditate even. Speak with Siri, perhaps? But they didn't have the time to really go into the decision, because Dooku wasn't wrong when he said he didn't have much time. But this was something Anakin could not, in good conscience, rush in to.

So, a compromise.

Letting out a deep breath, Anakin searched his pockets for the pad of flimsy he'd written his note on earlier and the writing implement. He quickly wrote down the address of the building they'd gone to before, where they'd outrun Palpatine's bounty hunters and ended up in the droid maintenance area.

"Meet me there tomorrow evening," he said as he handed the note over. Dooku took it, looked it over, and seemed to recognize it. Good. Then the man nodded.

"Tomorrow?" he asked.

"I have some errands I need to finish up today," Anakin said as he stood. Then he dropped some chips on the table. "This is on me."

With that, he signaled to Siri that he was leaving, making sure that it would look like he was just notifying the waitress. Thankfully, she'd made sure to keep herself near them and was the closest one, so it wouldn't seem out of place. Well, she seemed to be far better at under-cover work than Anakin ever would be.

"I will see you shortly, Count," he said with a nod of his head, before turning and striding out.

He made immediately for his and Siri's rendezvous point, arriving about eight minutes after leaving the bar. He made sure he hadn't been followed (he hadn't) before stripping his extensions off. For some reason, he suddenly felt restricted and caged inside them and had to get out.

Ten minutes later, Siri arrived, still in her waitress outfit, although she'd taken off the wig. It somehow made Anakin want to scour the image from his mind. It felt like seeing an older sister in a bakini or something, and just wasn't something he wanted to focus on.

Ever.

So instead, he focused on information and told her what Dooku had said. Then he waited for her response.

Siri just stared at him. "He wants to *what*?!" she finally asked.

Anakin sighed and nodded. "I had a similar reaction."

The blond just sat down, looking a little dazed. Anakin didn't blame her. "I've heard of people doing some pretty extreme things when going under cover, but this..."

"Agreed," Anakin muttered.

"And he wants you to somehow just... *kill* him when he goes too far?"

The former Sith held in a groan as he nodded again.

They both sat there in silence for several seconds.

"I'm... not getting anything from the Force," Siri finally said.

"Me neither," Anakin muttered.

Siri sighed. "Meditation, then?" she asked.

"Not sure how it will help, but we don't have many other options at this point," Anakin replied as he settled down in a cross-legged position next to her.

She didn't even respond, instead closing her eyes and falling into the Force. Anakin nodded in approval (not that she'd see it) before he thought about what he should use for his focal point today. While the dark side required his focal point to be extremely powerful, he had discovered that his focal point in the light would only have to be positive. He found it interesting to try and use different emotions as focal points to see how deep his connection with the Force could go.

After a moment, he decided to use his awe at Dooku's utter selflessness – at least in this particular case – and his newly found respect for the man. It was something he'd like to try and process anyway.

(He'd realized how lucky he was that his therapists had helped him learn to identify his emotions, and how much of a prerequisite that was for this type of meditation. Then he'd realized that there was no such thing as luck and had just shaken his head at the Force.)

Then, he meditated on Dooku's proposal and exactly why he felt how

he did about it.

After an hour and a half, he didn't have much of an answer, even if he did feel better about the whole situation. Well, calmer at least.

He and Siri had discussed it on the way back to the Temple, and they'd both come to the conclusion that they didn't really have any better ideas for infiltrating Palpatine's network, and while this had a lot of potentially high risks (what if Dooku fell fully and hard and decided to tell everything to Palpatine?), it had some potentially high rewards.

There was just no guarantee those rewards would come. Dooku could fully fall before completing his mission, and may not choose to get them the information they needed. Even if he didn't go to Palpatine, just standing in their way of getting what they needed would make their entire situation potentially far worse.

And yet... Anakin was getting a little desperate. In all honesty, he wanted Palpatine's threat handled long before the Clone Wars were even a twinkle in the Senate's eye. He hated to admit it, but his old tendencies of impatience were kicking in and he was having difficulties waiting for proof that they may never find. And if Dooku was so willing to play the sacrifice, could Anakin afford to *not* take advantage of that?

That didn't exactly make him feel any better about the entire thing. Or himself.

He never had been good at sending people on suicide missions. Well, perhaps as Vader... but that realization just served to make Anakin feel even worse. Of course.

They got back to the Temple late, but they still met Yoda on the platform. He didn't even pull a double-take at Siri's attire, instead focusing on each of their faces intently. The two of them exchanged glances before Anakin suggested they go somewhere private.

They ended up in the Room of a Thousand Fountains, as it happened to be closer than any of their quarters. Not too many people were around at this time as the diurnal Jedi were winding down and the nocturnal Jedi had yet to really start their day. Once they were settled, Anakin and Siri explained everything to Yoda, whose ears kept drooping more and more. When they finished, he sat there in silence for a very long time.

Finally, he spoke in a croaking voice. "Unsure, I am, as to whether pride, I should feel, or despair."

"Why not both?" Anakin asked. "Girth says that emotions don't have to fit together to be felt simultaneously."

The old troll nodded thoughtfully, although his ears still showed his sadness. "A wise being, Healer Girth is."

More silence at they contemplated that. Then Siri spoke up.

"Master, what should we do? I don't want to help *anyone* fall."

"It wouldn't be you 'helping' him," Anakin muttered, feeling incredibly guilty for even contemplating throwing Dooku at the speeder. Could he knowingly lead anyone down the path to the dark side at this point? Or would that break him too? All over again...

"Like it, I do not," Yoda said firmly. Then he deflated a bit. "But just like Dooku, this is. Stubborn to a fault, he is. Stubborn and willful. Worried, I am, that if reject him, you do, proceed on his own, he will."

Siri snorted. "That's the Dooku I remember – always putting us in impossible situations."

Well, she wasn't wrong.

Then to Anakin's surprise, Yoda turned to him. "If possible, it is, ask you, I would, to help him, as you can."

"You want me to do this?" Anakin asked, incredulous.

Yoda shook his head. "No. However, if going to do it, he is, then prefer for you to help him, I would. Leave hope for his return, I believe it would."

Anakin felt his eyes grow wide, and sensed similar shock from Siri through the bond.

"What happened to, 'Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.'"?

"Yet here with us, you are."

That took Anakin back a bit and he sat there, blinking at the older being for several seconds. He hadn't expected Yoda, of all people, to change his tune so thoroughly.

"It... it isn't easy," he finally managed to get out. "To come back."

Yoda nodded. "Expect that, I did."

"Right." He thought on that for a few more seconds before returning to the task at hand. "There is one more problem, though: I don't think it's possible to fall in a controlled way. I mean, we can make an *attempt*, but I don't think it will work."

Siri seemed to be thinking rather hard herself before looking over at Anakin. "You don't think there's even a chance?"

Anakin's lips tightened. "I'm... not sure. Perhaps it is possible, but it will take time to figure out."

"Time we don't have," Siri muttered, seeing his issue.

The former Sith shook his head. "No." Then he looked at Yoda. "If we had months or years to plan, then maybe, but with Palpatine involved like he is... Even if we made any progress, he would likely sense it and then either pick at weak points until Dooku crashed and any advantage we had or progress we'd made would be lost.

"Also, the dark side doesn't work exactly like the normal Force. Jedi are taught to listen to the Force as much as they request the Force listens to them – a constant state of a mutually positive symbiosis, for all intents and purposes. Darksiders *demand* what they want of the Force, and the dark side addicts them to that power so they keep coming back and keep gaining more power. Growing more powerful with the dark side is honestly simultaneous with acting more confident – arrogant even." Which was why Anakin wouldn't ever have been able to finish off the Emperor on his own; all of his confidence and arrogance as a Sith had been a lie, and Palpatine had known it. Vader had just been too blind – too desperate and addicted – to see it.

"Is that why it requires such strong emotions as anger and hate to use as focal points?" Siri asked, sounding honestly curious.

Anakin turned his surprised expression on to her. He hadn't expected her to ask without disgust or disapproval. Then he nodded. "Anger and hate don't fuel the dark side, they fuel the person. They are simply conduits strong enough to motivate a person into demanding and enforcing control. Then it magnifies and feeds that emotion back to you in a feedback loop. The stronger the anger, the more motivation, the more one gives up, the more one can use, and the more one

wants."

The blond woman's eyes widened. "You... almost make the dark side seem masochistic... and sapient... again."

The initiate couldn't help but shrug. That was how he'd understood it. Anger and hate – or whatever his focal point was – were reins used to force control on the dark side, and would only be useful if they were somehow powerful enough to hold the darkness in.

"Hmm. Back to the point, we should come," Yoda admonished softly.

"Right," Siri said with a nod of her head before turning to Anakin. "So what do we do?"

Anakin rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. "I don't think there's anything we *can* do but try to help him. I doubt it will work, but whether it does or not, it would put us – well, me, I suppose – on better terms with him if he does fall completely. Something I plan on informing him of before hand."

"Didn't you say that the dark side twists someone's thoughts and memories? Would earning good will even help?"

"Potentially," Anakin said slowly. "I mean, it didn't twist all of my memories, just the ones that would encourage me to give more of myself to it. I could still remember happy times, I just chose not to... 'indulge uselessly'."

"Hmm. Tell master Xio this, you should. Help her with her theories, it can."

Siri and Anakin stared at him for several seconds before exchanging glances.

"Theories?" Siri asked.

"She told you?" Anakin couldn't help if he sounded a bit incredulous.

Yoda looked amused. "Explain to the Council why she wanted access to Sith holocrons, she did."

Siri's eyes bulged. "She's been studying Sith holocrons?"

The former Sith looked away, embarrassed for some reason. And a little worried, but he felt that was perfectly reasonable. "She's doing it for me... to understand me more."

The blond woman just stared at him incredulously. "I don't know whether to be extremely impressed at her dedication or utterly horrified at the lengths she's willing to go." And the current similarities to Dooku hung silently in the air like bombs waiting to drop.

"Monitoring her, we are," Yoda assured her. Siri didn't look appeased.

"I've felt no darkness from her whatsoever," Anakin said. "And trust me, I've looked for it ever since she told me."

"Hmm... okay," Siri responded, sounding a little less unsure. Well, it wouldn't be too bad to have more than one person on the look out for any dark-side tendencies from their counselor, Anakin supposed.

A yawn forced its way out of him quite suddenly and he blinked. How tired was he that a moment there was an actual lull in the conversation, he showed it? He blamed the child's body *again*. So frustrating. At least he'd be turning twelve soon. In about a month. One more year closer to being an adult again, with a fully-functioning brain and at least some mastery over himself.

"Agree with you, I do," Yoda said, ears perking up ever so slightly.

Anakin blinked at him, then tipped his head in question.

"Tired, we all are. To bed we should go. Rest, we must."

The former Sith felt that familiar resignation creep up on him. "So that's it, then?" he asked. "We – I – help Dooku fall to the darkness and deal with the fallout as best we can?"

He felt a hand on his arm and followed it up to meet Siri's sad gaze. "What other choice do we have, Anakin?"

Yoda's ears drooped again.

"More observation and brainstorming could present a solution," Anakin said.

"We're open to suggestion," Siri replied with a sigh.

And... he didn't have any to offer. Of course.

"Look, let's think on it," Siri suggested. "Sleep on it. We'll discuss our options again tomorrow before we go to meet him. And we'll keep thinking of something else – some other idea."

"Agree, I do," Yoda said, mouth set firmly. "Find another solution we can."

Well, he appreciated that they were trying. Not that he'd ever phrase it like that to Yoda.

"Alright," Anakin agreed, wanting to sound determined himself, but very well aware that he only came off as tired.

They bid Yoda goodnight – apparently he wanted to stay for some more private meditation (Anakin approved) – and left the room of a thousand fountains.

Anakin offered to walk Siri to her room first, before she took him to the creche. Seeing as she still wore the two-piece, flashy monstrosity of a uniform, she agreed. Too bad they'd been too focused on speaking with Yoda when they'd returned or they would have made a detour to grab a cloak or something. And, apparently, something had happened to prevent her from getting her initial robes and tunics when she'd left the bar earlier. She wouldn't tell him exactly what, but he got the feeling that someone had realized that she shouldn't be there and had followed her out of the bar for a bit. Not wanting to give away the fact that she was a Jedi, she'd had to lose them before going to meet Anakin by their appointed time.

They hurried down the halls, ignoring any other Jedi they came across (a fair amount, many of whom did raise an eyebrow in their direction), intent on getting to where she could change again. So focused on reaching her room were they, that they didn't notice the familiar presence they almost ran into as they turned into the residential wing housing the quarters knights (and their padawans) stayed in.

Siri just suddenly froze and Anakin was tired enough to actually run into her.

"Siri?" he asked, looking up at a very rigid back. Then he looked around her and saw a blank-faced Obi-Wan staring at them... well, at Siri. He seemed rather shocked. Then the embarrassment hit him, practically like a volcano erupting, or a hurricane slamming into Anakin – coming from the woman standing next to him. He actually staggered for a moment.

Then he looked up at Siri again. He'd never seen more than a light blush on her cheeks. She'd always been a bit reckless, but she'd also always had very good self-mastery. Now, though, she had a rather

deep shade of red on her cheeks that off-set the flashy material of the two-piece. Anakin had known that Siri was considered attractive (although he'd always been partial to brunettes, himself), but it hadn't really crossed his mind that she was considered attractive. Especially by ginger-haired knights if Anakin read Obi-Wan's minute expression correctly. What were the odds of them running into him of all people? At this time of night? And Siri hadn't cared about the other Jedi they'd passed... Then again, now that he knew more about her feelings towards Obi-Wan, that did make sense.

He wasn't sure how long they all just stood there in a sort of stand off, but then Obi-Wan did something Anakin couldn't help but be impressed by.

"Knight Tachi," Obi-Wan said with a warm smile. "Pleasure to see you. Have a pleasant evening." Then, with that, he just walked by them. No other comment, no smirk, not even a second look. Was he even male? Maybe he wasn't as straight as Anakin had always assumed?

Then, to Anakin's confusion, the embarrassment he felt from Siri turned to indignation. Well, it seemed that she still had a ways to go before she regained that self-mastery.

"That's it?" she asked after Obi-Wan. Then she covered her mouth, looking as if she wanted to melt into the ground again. Oh, and the embarrassment came back full force.

Obi-Wan finally glanced back, and Anakin could finally see that familiar, amused smirk of his. "I can't say I don't enjoy the view," he said, "but then, I always do when you're around, no matter your choice of clothing."

If anything, Siri's cheeks grew even darker. Anakin was afraid she might pass out. And... that was far more forward of Obi-Wan than he'd expected, too. And smoother. How surprising.

"You'd better not mention this again," Siri practically growled.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't dream of it. Goodnight." And then he turned and continued to walk toward his original destination, whatever that was.

And Anakin couldn't hold it in any longer. He let out a snort. Siri rounded on him, and that just set him off harder. The snort turned into a series of snickers, and then a guffaw. He ended up doubled over, trying not to laugh too loudly and failing miserably.

"Ha, ha," Siri muttered, still radiating embarrassment, but he could also sense the underlying amusement at the situation (and a touch of pride at the Obi-Wan's comment). "Come on, Hero with No Fear."

Anakin was sure the annoyed look he'd meant to shoot at her was completely undermined by the amusement he was still trying to rein in.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I have to admit, that last scene is one of my favorites. lol

I would like to thank Carradee, Khalthar and Quathis for their beta-reading skillz and amazing support.

Also, I do read every review I get, even if I don't get around to replying to them. I love reading them, though, and they give me ideas, point out issues I can address later, etc. So, thank you to everyone who has read this or any of my other stories.

My original webcomic: https://www.webtoons.com/en/challenge/bittersweet/list?title_no=194956

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT NOTE AT THE END!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To say Anakin wasn't looking forward to meeting Dooku again that night would be an understatement similar to calling the Death Star large. The very thought made Anakin sick. He didn't feel angry about it, for once (maybe he was finally breaking that habit? He hoped so because that would be *something* good to come of the situation), but more resigned and tired. Between the emotional and mental exhaustion of the past few days combined with him having to potentially perform an extremely undesirable task, it was all he could do to make it to his classes that day.

During their lunch break, he sat at his usual table, missing Coira rather sorely as she would be eating in the cafeteria reserved for knights and padawans. Maelee, the only other person there who knew more about him, kept shooting him worried glances, but didn't seem to know how to approach him about it. He wasn't sure whether to be grateful or disappointed.

After their group had finished eating, they all decided to spend the rest of the time block in the Room of a Thousand Fountains and all made their way there. Hik'te spoke excitedly with Tru and Darra, with Maelee following close behind. Then Thoran and Hale and finally Anakin, who trailed after them on autopilot as he tried not to think of what he would have to do later that night.

Maybe he shouldn't have been surprised when he finally noticed the large, quiet boy by his side, but he was. Mentally, he kicked himself for not paying attention to his surroundings. He was in the temple, true, but that didn't mean nothing could happen.

Before they got to the room, Hale held out an arm in front of Anakin, gesturing to the side of the hall and away from their little group (who didn't notice, apparently). They went down the hall's off-shoot just a little ways before Hale turned to face him.

"Hale... is everything okay?" Anakin asked, a little worried.

"I was just going to ask you the same thing," the older boy said, a

troubled expression on his face.

Anakin blinked. And the observant children strike again.

"Am I that obvious?" he asked quietly.

Hale rolled his eyes, exasperated. "Not this time, no. I mean, you're quieter, but you've been talking normally so," he faded off with a shrug.

"It's nothing," the time-traveler said after a moment, repressing a tired sigh.

Hale's frown deepened. "I promised Coira that I'd look after you while she's not here," he said. Anakin's eyebrows rose. What? "And right now, I know it isn't nothing."

Anakin found himself smiling a sad little thing that hopefully showed his regret. He wasn't about to go sharing everything with even more children. He'd been lucky Coira and Maelee could keep it quiet. Not that Hale couldn't, but the fewer people who knew, the better. He still regretted it a bit as he could tell that the other boy was genuinely worried.

"It's not something I can discuss right now," he said. "But I have spoken of it to Master Yoda, so I promise it's been addressed."

Hale still didn't look happy, but he did nod his head. "Good. She'll be glad to know you're starting to care about yourself more."

And with that, he gestured with his head back towards the hall, obviously with the intent to catch up to the rest of their group. He left Anakin wondering if all children except him had been born insightful.

He did find himself smiling as he followed Hale to the Room of a Thousand Fountains. It felt good to realize that there were people watching out for him again, even if they hadn't gone through puberty yet. They seemed better for him than most adults in his former life had been. He wasn't sure what that said about him... or them. Or both, perhaps. And at the moment, he couldn't bring himself to care.

xXx

"Hey, you can do this," Siri said to Anakin as she dropped him off at their rendezvous point. Today she was dressed in more normal clothing, albeit the outfit looked more akin to what someone would

wear to go clubbing in. Well, to Anakin it *seemed* more conservative somehow, even if the outfit covered just about as much as the other one had. Of course, this time she left her robe and an extra change of clothing with him, and he'd leave said clothing here at the little motel room they'd rented specifically to get ready. Then Siri had shown up, already ready to go and Anakin had wondered what the point was. Ah, well. At least she wouldn't have to mind-trick everyone in tonight's bar into thinking that she worked there and have to leave in a hurry rather than have a confrontation in front of a potential darksider.

Tonight, she'd be going into the bar alone, as a patron. She didn't have the time to get herself situated as a worker in this bar, nor did she have the inclination after the last one had turned out. She said she'd just have to subtly mind-trick anyone who hit on her who she couldn't shut down with a couple of well-placed words.

Anakin shifted his bundle of limbs and went to get out of the speeder, far more slowly than he normally would have. He could do this, yes. Didn't mean he wanted to. He still sent Siri a nod and what he hoped was a reassuring smile. She didn't look convinced, but drove off so he must have been somewhat successful.

He let himself into the room and dropped the bag on the old bed. At least it was clean. In a couple of minutes, Anakin had the limbs and mask strapped on. Leaving Siri's change of clothes with the bag behind him, he ducked out and made his way to the new bar.

He doubted they'd stay there for long.

He waited until Siri had been in for a little while before he went in himself. It was still fairly early as far as the night life went, and so not too crowded. Anakin once again found Dooku sitting towards the back at a rather secluded table. Siri was seated at the bar near the man and she nodded minutely at Anakin as he passed. He still scanned the room and felt for disturbances. Just because Siri had cased the joint didn't mean he should slack off. Thankfully, he found nothing.

"Ah, Luke," Dooku said as Anakin sat down. "Good evening."

"Count Dooku," the former Sith replied, hoping he didn't sound as stiff as he felt.

"How was your day?" Dooku asked, perusing the menu.

Anakin frowned, then shook his head. The truth had worked with the

man so far, so why not? "You have my apologies, but I am far too concerned about what you are proposing to make small talk tonight." And apparently far too uptight to use the more casual slang he'd been trying to cultivate to get away from Vader's hard-won upper-class accent the Emperor had insisted upon. He never had fully mastered it, but he'd come pretty close and had spoken like that for so long...

Hale had said he was speaking 'normally' (like an eleven-year-old former slave – something he still had to concentrate on doing) earlier that day, but he couldn't help being grateful that he didn't have to bother in his Luke Lars disguise.

Dooku eyed him for a couple of moments before he set the menu down and nodded. "Understandable."

They sat there in awkward silence for a bit before Anakin spoke.

"Are you *positive* you want to try this?"

The Count thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "I've made up my mind, Luke." Well, at least he'd gotten to where he could use the name smoothly. Typical Dooku, looking and acting completely unruffled even in the worst situations.

Anakin slumped just a little. "Very well," he said softly, "I will help you as best I can."

The older man blinked for a couple of moments before he smiled warmly. "Thank you, Luke."

"But, I have to clarify some things: First, I have no idea if this will work at all. You may not be able to touch the dark side without Falling completely."

Dooku nodded and held up a hand. "If that happens and I lose my head, please kill me."

Anakin felt his breath catch in his throat. He hadn't killed since he'd come back... he didn't want to. It felt too much like Vader... And yet, he had to give Dooku *some* reassurance. So he nodded, slowly.

"You have my word."

The former Jedi smiled a little sadly at Anakin. "Thank you."

More silence until Anakin decided to continue with his explanation.

"Secondly, I have... instructed apprentices in both the dark side and the light side... neither one of those situations turned out very well." Although, one of his apprentices had turned out pretty amazing despite his inadequacies. "I'm positive part of that is because I am not the best teacher."

Dooku frowned, but nodded again.

"And lastly, I have a colleague who will accompany us. You have my word that she is trustworthy, and she will likely not take any part in any instruction or experimentation."

That seemed to surprise the Count as he didn't seem to know what to think of that.

"A... colleague. Is she... Force Sensitive?"

Anakin nodded.

"A... darksider, as you so aptly put it?"

"No," Anakin shook his head. He could tell Dooku wanted to ask more, but the man refrained, for which Anakin couldn't help but be grateful.

"As long as she can be trusted," he finally said, sounding unsure for the first time.

"I guarantee you, she can be."

Dooku still didn't look pleased, but he did concede. Probably understood that if he rejected Siri's involvement, it would be a deal-breaker for Anakin.

"I must insist that we begin as soon as possible," the Count said, coming forth with his own terms.

Anakin nodded grimly. "I thought as much. She will meet us at a rendezvous point tonight."

Dooku's shoulders relaxed a little. Apparently he hadn't thought Anakin would agree to that. "I see you are treating this with the proper gravitas and support. I thank you for it."

The former Sith only nodded, not really trusting himself to speak further.

"I must insist that we have dinner, though." Anakin wondered how the

man could eat. Although, he could use a good, stiff drink at the moment. Was it worth Siri's wrath when she saw? Because he doubted he could hide it from her with how clumsy he still was with these limbs. He could pass off as an alien, but he couldn't work slight of hand. Hmm... no, probably not. More's the pity.

"Very well," he said, perusing the menu and the soups they had. It would probably be all he could swallow anyway. As discreetly as he could (mainly, under the table where Dooku couldn't see) he signed to Siri that they'd be there for a bit longer so at least one of them could be comfortable while they waited for Dooku to finish his meal.

xXx

Thankfully, Dooku and Anakin finished eating at about the same time. After Dooku covered the tab, they both got up and left, Anakin following Dooku (figuring the man turning his back to him was also him saying 'I trust you'... or 'I have to trust you' – Anakin wasn't sure which one bothered him more).

They caught an air-taxi close to the rendezvous point and then Anakin directed Dooku to a turbo lift before following him in, not quite able to completely trust the man himself.

He couldn't help but feel that this had all the markings of a remarkable failure waiting to happen. He wondered if they could withstand the fallout...

'They' meaning the galaxy.

The two of them exited at the right level, one with just enough grime to show its age and general state of care (not a lot) while being industrial enough to be practically deserted. Anakin showed Dooku to one of the buildings – this one wasn't abandoned, but it was rented out on a flexible basis by a... less than reputable person. It loomed in the dark shadows and dim lights of the Coruscanti underworld like a beast, ready to swallow them all whole.

Anakin didn't even pause as he walked inside as he and Siri had made sure to take out all of the security before-hand, even the hidden security. That didn't mean he wasn't on edge. He'd scanned the whole thing with the Force a half-dozen times before they'd even gotten out of the speeder. He could sense no one inside, and the security they had set up hadn't been disturbed, so he tried to act as confident as he could instead, hoping some of that false bravado could get him through what was to come.

He and Siri had set up a little room off to one side with some chairs and little else. It felt a bit like an interrogation room, although Anakin wasn't sure who was being interrogated at this point. He took a seat as gracefully as he could in the stilts as Dooku walked to the seat across from him.

"Before we get started," Dooku began, reaching into his robe. Anakin tensed for a moment, then relaxed as the older man pulled out a data pad and held it out. Anakin took it carefully and began to look through the information on it. "I've taken the liberty of looking up different ways to help or prevent addiction in the medical field. You likened the dark side to a drug, so I thought this might help."

Anakin blinked behind his mask. This wasn't a bad thought... but it was one he couldn't see helping the situation. He tried to look as graceful as possible as he worked with his motor control to overlook the information on the pad. He hadn't done much in the way of finer functions when he'd had the arm extensions on before. Whether he managed or not, Dooku didn't say anything, so he just went on. He examined the procedures outlined in the different articles, but once he got to the end, he sighed and handed the data pad back.

"There is one major problem I can see with this," Anakin said. "The substances for these procedures are highly controlled and given to the patient under watchful care... but all of that is rather negated when you have ready access to the addictive substance. There is no way I – or anyone, really – could limit your use of the dark side without cutting you off from the Force altogether." Well, there were ways to cut people off from one side of the Force, but they required some pretty specialized objects that Anakin didn't have access to at this point. And neither did Dooku, he was sure.

Dooku sighed and nodded grimly. "Yes, I saw that as well. But since the thought had merit..." he trailed off.

The former Sith nodded in agreement. "It was a good idea," he said.

The older man shot Anakin a dry look. "I don't need pity or condescension."

Anakin held up his hands. "That was not my intention, and I apologize if it came off that way."

Dooku looked at Anakin for a couple more seconds before deflating. "No, I suppose you didn't."

They were both on edge, and they knew it. This went against everything Anakin had ever said to the man, and against everything Dooku had ever been taught. He supposed it was natural they'd both be nervous.

Anakin cleared his throat and figured he could share his own thoughts while they waited for Siri. "I'd actually like to inform you of my own idea. Coming back from the dark was… difficult, to say the least, and not all of that has to do with the emotional and mental states of the person in question. The techniques tend to be different because the goals of those who touch each side are different. For instance, Jedi meditation is difficult to achieve as a darksider. The light, however, tends to be a little more flexible."

Dooku cocked his head to one side. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I still have… difficulties meditating in more conventional ways. The dark side lends itself to intense passion. One learns to focus on an emotion – an intense emotion, such as anger or hatred – to touch the darkness and meditate. The traditional light techniques tend to focus on nothing and allow oneself to become one with the Force much like a blank slate. I currently meditate by focusing on an intense, positive emotion as it is a sort of half-way point – a bridge between the two techniques, if you will.

"If you are amenable we could try to teach you that technique but… I am unsure as to whether we have enough time for you to fully adapt to and thus adopt it."

Dooku thought about his words for several seconds before shaking his head. "It is a good idea, and I agree that if we had more time, it would be promising, but I was a Jedi for years. I avoided intense emotion as often as possible and I can admit that is not a habit I can simply break at the moment."

Anakin's heart sank, just a little. "Yes. I thought you would say that."

He faded off and the room fell into an awkward silence. After a couple of seconds, Dooku took out his comm and checked the time. "When was your... friend supposed to be here?"

Anakin frowned. "She should have been here already." Between his reading Dooku's information and his rejected proposal, it should have given Siri plenty of time.

He got up and walked over to the door, peering out into the empty

maze of rooms and hallways outside. Then he took out his comm and called Siri.

"Hello?" she answered, sounding perfectly nonchalant.

"Did you run into a problem?" he asked.

"You could say that. I'm actually pulling up now."

"Alright," Anakin said slowly.

"I decided to change a couple of things. You'll see when I get there. Zora out."

Anakin blinked. Zora? The under-cover persona she'd taken for the slavery gig... that she hadn't gone on in this time. Oh. Well, that seemed appropriate, he supposed.

The woman that walked up to them not two minutes later was not the same woman he'd dropped off at the bar. Anakin raised his eyebrows behind his mask and his first thought was 'how does she have so many wigs?' Her normally blond hair was covered by a short, natural-looking red-haired wig. She had a tattoo on the side of her face and armor befitting a bounty hunter. Where had she gotten *that*?!

The former Sith crossed his arms. He didn't even have to say anything as she just shrugged.

"Sorry I'm late."

Anakin sighed. "You always say that." May as well roll with it, right?

She scoffed. "When was the last time I was late to anything?"

The former Sith just shook his head and turned back to the room. "Count Dooku, meet Zora."

He didn't look too impressed, but he did nod in her direction. "A pleasure."

Siri nodded back to him, barely polite, before turning back to Anakin. "So I just sit here and make sure he doesn't go crazy?"

Anakin put a hand to his forehead and found himself even more annoyed when the digits met the mask and not his flesh.

"S-Zora," he muttered, barely catching himself. He never had been

good at this 'undercover' thing.

"You asked me to be here," she said pointedly as she strode past him. A third chair had been set up in the corner and she took to it with a casual plop. "Don't mind me."

Dooku's expression could have sucked water out of the air on Tatooine. "She's not dark, you say?"

Anakin sent his general disapproval through their bond to Siri. "'Rude' is not necessarily synonymous for 'dark'."

"Hmm," Dooku replied, shooting one last look at Siri. Then he dismissed her and turned to Anakin. "Shall we, then?"

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Anakin started by going into a deeper explanation on the theories around emotional focal points and how to use them to draw on the dark side. He also touched on how they were necessary for maximum control and power, before going on to describe some specific techniques of Sith meditation. He also explained the difference between asking for help from the Force normally and demanding subservience from the darkness. He then reiterated how one cannot waver or the dark side could swallow a person. That was only one of may ways in which it would completely twist everything about the user. Dooku nodded along, asking appropriate questions in that all-too-calm voice of his. While he appreciated the Count and his stoicism, it still didn't help Anakin's nerves much.

Eventually, they decided to try and see what he could do with mildly negative emotions first, mainly due to the older man's suggestion.

While he agreed to the experiment, Anakin knew it was a lost cause from the beginning. Mildly negative emotions, unless tied into something much stronger, just didn't have the necessary power behind them to motivate one into touching the dark side, let alone control it. Still, Dooku did everything Anakin told him to, focused on his emotions, tried to use that to his advantage, demanded the Force come to him…

It didn't.

Half an hour later, Anakin sat back in his chair, calming his annoyance by releasing it to the Force.

He sighed. "I know we have not been working on this long," he finally said, "but I... really just do not think a controlled fall is possible in the time we have. It goes against the very nature of the dark side."

Dooku, looking frustrated gave a small, 'humph'. Then said, "It seems the Sith holocron I studied at the temple was correct after all."

Anakin blinked. "At the temple?"

The former Jedi nodded. "I... came across one while I lived in the Jedi temple. I... didn't entirely trust what it told me."

The former Sith blinked. Not entirely trusting what a Sith holocron told you wasn't exactly a stupid idea... but he couldn't help but wonder how long the older man had been disillusioned by the Jedi. Just how much had the dark side influenced him, with or without his knowing? And why hadn't he mentioned it before?

"Did it... match with the rest of what I said?"

Dooku scoffed. "Not entirely. And I was more inclined to trust your word."

Anakin felt a twinge of pride – and even warmth – at that. So he had won over the man, even if only a little. Then he frowned.

"So you believe me over the holocron, but in this case I was incorrect?"

The Count studied Anakin for a bit, then shook his head. "No. You said this was highly unlikely. The holocron said it was impossible. Not in so many words, as that was not what I was studying at the time, but that is the gist."

Ah.

They fell into a silence that stretched for several seconds before Dooku tentatively, he spoke up. "If I may be so bold... how did you Fall?"

Anakin stiffened and he felt Siri do the same through their bond, even if he couldn't see her so much as twitch a muscle from her lazy position. He reclassified her undercover skills, moving them from 'good' to 'excellent'. He shouldn't be surprised with how often she'd been tasked for work like that in their previous life. It was still something to note a master at her craft.

It only took him a moment to realize he'd thought on a tangent again and pulled himself back to the question at hand, as undesirable as it was.

"I..." he wasn't sure he was willing to tell his story to Dooku, of all people... and yet... Maybe if he could speak to the Count about everything, the man would understand how futile the whole situation was and give it up. One could hope. Anakin bit his lip, but decided to push aside his own fears for the sake of the galaxy.

His Obi-Wan would be so proud.

"My... fall was a... combination of many things," he said softly. "I had so much on my plate, was hiding some pretty big secrets and had a certain Sith Lord convince me that he was a good confidant." Dooku raised his eyebrows, but otherwise didn't react, so Anakin continued.

"Someone I... cared very deeply for – my secret wife," may as well give him as encompassing of a picture as possible, "was pregnant. I was fighting a war and had the atrocities of that in my recent background and I began to have visions of her dying in childbirth. I was desperate to save her and convinced that the friends I had at the time wouldn't understand. Like I said, we'd kept our relationship secret."

Dooku raised an eyebrow. "Some friends."

Anakin tried to shrug nonchalantly. He wasn't sure how well he pulled it off. "The situation in general was my fault as much as it was theirs." Or more. "In any case, I finally went to the Sith for some council. He told me he could save her, but only if I joined him. At first I refused, but when I brought his works to light, my friends decided to fight him then and there."

At this, the Count raised an eyebrow. "Fighting a Sith? Were they mad?"

The time-traveler sighed. "Just desperate. They wanted the war to end and were willing to kill him to do it. But if I lost him, I lost my chance to save my wife." He snorted derisively. "The son of a bantha set it up so well. I had a choice to make – help my 'friends' who I couldn't trust, or him, who could possibly save my wife and children. I... chose him." He swallowed. "I chose wrong. My wife died anyway, but by that time..." he shook his head. "The man had me believing that I killed her myself. With the power-high I'd been on... it wasn't exactly implausible." He was still convinced her death was on his hands.

He felt Siri reach out to him through their bond and he sent a feeling of gratitude back. He needed (and appreciated) the support right now.

"It took me far too long after that to realize what he'd done and just how he'd set it up. Then it took me nearly two decades to find the motivation to stop and fight back."

Dooku frowned. "That is... quite a long time." Anakin could see the gears in his head turning. Likely trying to put together a timeline, probably realizing that not everything matched up. Where had 'Luke Lars' been after this so-called fall of his? How had this gone on when Sidious was running for office and serving in the Senate? He just went with the first excuse he could think of.

"It was," he confirmed. "I mostly ran errands for him in the outer rim," he said, truthfully. "I rarely had extended contact with him after that." And when he had, it had been...

Anakin shuddered.

He got a hold of himself again quickly before fixing his eyes back on Dooku. The man had more questions, but he must have decided against asking them in favor of voicing some observations.

"It seemed he used more than... anger to turn you," the Count commented. "I was under the impression that that is the... normal rout a fallen Jedi takes."

Anakin bit his lip, thinking carefully before he spoke. "The best dark side techniques are fueled by anger, yes, but no darksider uses only anger. They tie into other emotions to make the anger and hate stronger – similar to a feedback loop. Desperation, for instance, is a very powerful tool."

Dooku sighed. "Then it seems I am not... desperate enough."

He frowned thoughtfully. "You have mentioned that you have trained apprentices before." Anakin nodded carefully. "How would one go about training a child in use of the dark side?"

The former Sith tried not to flinch. He wasn't sure how successful he was.

"Torture," he said softly.

Dooku's eyes widened. "Pardon me?"

Anakin looked away. "If one can find an apprentice who is already angry, all the better. But to break someone, they are put through mental and/or physical torture. But breaking people who have a solid emotional and mental foundation is far more difficult – and time consuming – than it may sound. Sith are always on the look out for someone ripe for the picking, so to speak, because this, once again, minimizes effort and maximizes 'output'."

The Count frowned again. "I am not exactly the epitome of an emotionally unstable person. So, why does he want me?"

Anakin scoffed softly as he sat forward. "Isn't it obvious? It's a matter of skill. He doesn't have the time or patience to train a new apprentice, so he is seeking someone who already has a lot of what *can* transfer from one side to the other under their belt – someone who is useful to him. That is all. He is using your frustration with the Jedi and perhaps even the death of your Padawan to get to you."

Dooku's fists tightened on his lap, perhaps from Anakin saying those words so easily, or perhaps from the truth of them. Anakin wasn't sure.

He also wasn't sure he wanted to say what came to his mind next, but after several awkward moments of silence, he opened his mouth, the words coming out slowly, carefully, almost afraid they would break something. They just might.

"That anger – at him using you like that – at the Jedi for not listening – at the Sith for killing your former apprentice – at the general state of the galaxy and the corruption in the Republic – that, Count, is what could turn you."

The white-haired man looked up in surprise, then back down at his hands. His jaw set in determination and Anakin felt a sense of foreboding. He shot a look over at Siri, who had shifted into a position that would allow her to rise easily. She nodded at him to let him know she was ready.

Then Dooku thrust his hand out, eyes focused and concentrating. It took a few seconds for a sense of cold to wash through the Force and the ball he'd been focusing on before shot into the air. Siri's hand inched towards where her lightsaber was likely hidden. Anakin, on the other hand, just closed his eyes. Another person on his list of people whose lives would have been better without him in it.

It was so anti-climactic and disheartening and...

He suddenly just felt so... *tired*.

It was official: Count Dooku had Fallen.

After a couple of seconds, the former Jedi looked down at his hand. "Well, that seems like a bit of a waste."

Anakin forced himself to swallow. "Because you can do so much more with it?"

Dooku looked up. His eyes remained their blue-gray color, but there was a hunger there that Anakin did not like. The man didn't answer the question. He didn't have to.

"Perhaps you should see if you can use the Force like normal?" the former Sith suggested as nonchalantly as he could.

The Count blinked at him. "Why?"

A ball of carbonite began to form in Anakin's stomach. He ignored it. "To make sure you have more options available to you."

A tense silence fell over the room as Dooku studied Anakin. Despite him looking at his hand and then the other occupants of the room, the ball still hung in the air. After a couple of seconds, Dooku nodded and the cold dissipated as the ball fell. Before it could roll off the table, though, the former Jedi stretched out his hand and it lifted, far more calmly, into the air again.

Anakin released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. At least that was something. It was a small reassurance in the ocean of grief and self loathing that threatened to overcome him. He clung to it like a dying man would a raft in a storm and hoped that didn't show in his body language.

Dooku seemed surprised as he once again looked down at his hand, leaving the ball hanging in the air.

"It seems Master Yoda was wrong."

Anakin allowed himself to frown, despite the fact that Dooku couldn't see it. "How so?"

The older man waved a hand dismissively. "He said that once you start down the dark path, will it dominate your destiny forever."

The former Sith sighed and slumped a little, still ready to move if he

had to, but willing to (having to) give the benefit of the doubt for now. "He isn't entirely wrong," he said softly. "The dark side will always be a part of me – of who I am. No matter how I wish it otherwise." He looked up at Dooku. "And now, you too. You can use the Force like normal, which is good, but that doesn't negate your decision to turn to the darkness."

Dooku hummed and looked down at his hand again. Then the cold was back and Anakin shot a worried glance over at Siri.

"There is so... much here," the Count whispered. "We could do so much! Why wait? Let us go and destroy him now!"

And there was the power high.

Anakin tried not to panic as he shook his head. "If you go to him right now, he will utterly destroy you."

Dooku looked like he honestly couldn't compute that. Definitely a side effect of Falling. Dooku was usually much faster on the uptake.

Then his brow furrowed in the beginnings of anger. And there was the Count Dooku Anakin remembered. "How–"

Anakin cut him off. "Everything you're experiencing right now, he did *decades* ago. He has power, experience and years of planning on his side. We have one recently turned dark-Jedi, a recovering Sith and a recovering..." he paused, looking over at Siri.

"Force user, bounty hunter, back-up dancer?" she gave a couple of (rather ridiculous or far too vague) suggestions, obviously trying to lighten the mood.

The former Sith rolled his eyes, even if he did appreciate her efforts, then looked back at Dooku. "I know you feel like you can do anything right now, but you can't. Turning to the dark side isn't just a simple step where everything you knew as a Jedi transfers over. Having experience in using the Force *helps*, but I've already explained how the most useful techniques require a completely different state of mind that takes time and effort to reach." Not that he wanted Dooku to reach that point... again.

It was still looking like the Count was having issues really understanding the concept. Anakin could almost hear him thinking, 'How can I lose with this kind of power at my fingertips? How can it be so different?'

"Even together, we wouldn't stand a chance at the moment," Anakin said, wishing he could rub the bridge of his nose. He'd felt like that a lot as Vader when he couldn't reach his face through the mask... and the memory alone wasn't helping his current situation. He could practically feel his control slipping and had to take several deep breaths to try and calm down, fighting the panic, frustration and sheer exhaustion the entire situation seemed so determined to pile on him.

"Don't count on me, right now," Siri piped in, sounding a bit annoyed herself. She fixed her gaze on Dooku. "I'm still recovering from a rather debilitating spell I had recently. I cannot guarantee I would be able to fight to the degree I would need to throughout an encounter." He heard her steady undertone, and she didn't even look over at Anakin. He got her message anyway. She could feel Anakin's fluctuating emotions and was trying to get the Count to see sense.

She also had a point. That would be an emotionally charged battle and Anakin could easily send her back into a relapse if he wasn't careful.

"Besides, I don't have the skill, at the moment," the time-traveler muttered, his frustration growing. Because despite everything he and Siri had said (and his better judgment), it was a tempting offer. Barge right in with Siri and Dooku in tow and confront Sidious then and there... but he wasn't in a good state of mind and while his lightsaber skills had improved, as had his Force skills while meditating with Master Yaddle, he knew that a confrontation would not end well. They were all unstable and he knew it. With Dooku's recent Fall, the man wasn't in the proper mind-set and Anakin himself... well, he didn't feel the greatest, and he did *not* want to go through a battle with Sidious. Not only was this a terrible place and time, but with Dooku and Siri there...

No, he had to retreat, before something really bad—

"Very well. Then I will go myself," Dooku said.

Anakin's mind ground to a halt as he watched the Count spin gracefully around and walk towards the door.

"Did you not hear a word he just said?" Siri asked, sounding as incredulous as Anakin felt.

"The words of weak cowards," the man said with a wave of his hand, brushing off her objection nonchalantly.

Anakin already knew how fast shock, despair and frustration could become anger. He'd known for far too long.

It probably didn't help that Anakin *felt* like a coward for not confronting Sidious already, or that he was fighting off his own memories of when he'd first fallen and knew the state of mind the older man was in at the moment and that the only thing that would knock some sense into him would be someone forcing him into humility again, or that said man was about to take all of their hard work – everything so many people had been striving towards for the last two years – and throw it all out the window.

Throw Obi-Wan's sacrifice to send him back out the window.

And Anakin saw red.

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Sheev Palpatine blinked, looking up from his data pads and the letter he'd been signing. Then he turned to the large window of his office, carefully allowing a fraction of his power out to feel around. Something had... changed.

It took him a minute or two to figure it out, but when he did, he couldn't help but grin triumphantly.

Dooku had Fallen.

Finally.

He would have to confront him and offer—

Then, a wave of pure power hit the Chancellor hard enough that he actually flinched, dropping the stylus he'd been holding. Then he blinked for a couple of seconds while he regained himself, thankful that no one else had been in his office at the time.

After only a couple of moments, he opened his desk drawer and pulled out a comm unit. He merely opened the holographic keypad and sent a text only message, closing his eyes for only a moment to figure out exactly where he felt the presences. The industrial area... yes. Right on the cusp of this district and the next.

He doubted his men would find anything – was rather sure they wouldn't even be able to find the right building, Force blind as they were. But even slime could get lucky.

Then he put his work off to one side and opened his personal computer. It was time to slice into some of the security holos in the area and see if he could spot something as well.

"Good evening, Lord Vader. Let us see if you can dodge my net this time."

Chapter End Notes

AN: I'd say I'm sorry for the cliffhanger... but I'm really not. :p ;)

I would like to thank my beta readers, Carradee, Quathis and Khalthar! Thank you guys so much!

So, I have some bad news. My manager (of my webcomic) and I have decided to enter a webcomic contest. For those of you who follow my webcomic Bittersweet... well, this is nothing like that. It's going to be a fantasy about someone learning to trust so they can start healing from childhood abuse, so much more like the Many Sights series. And we'll see if I can do that in 5 episodes. ^^; Wish me luck. I'll need it.

Also, while I don't expect it to affect the posting of this story, having to work on the webomic crunch like that might take away all my time for answering comments (although I read every one of them and love them!) and even posting more of the story. I still plan on posting this once a month (I should be able to get a chapter posted once a month for the next four months), but it really depends on what goes on with the comic.

If you'd like to support my current comic, you can go to Webtoons, search for HACamp and it should come right up. :) Don't forget to rate it (honestly, please). Thank you!

Sorry for the potentially bad news, but please, wish me luck. :) Four months and it'll be over one way or the other. Promise. :D

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin saw red.

Siri, who had taken a couple of steps after Dooku, her hand on her lightsaber hilt, gasped and stumbled. A hand shot to her head as she doubled over, as if in pain. A whimper escaped her lips and her gray eyes went wide and glossy.

Anakin ignored her, stepping right past her as if she wasn't even there.

Dooku must have felt something change, because he paused and began to turn around.

"You want to see the power he has?" Anakin asked darkly. He waved a hand and Dooku went flying down the hall, crashing into old crates stacked there. "Or the power that could not destroy him?!"

The Count blinked, likely out of surprise and shock as he tried to shake off the suddenness of it all and get to his feet. He wasn't succeeding.

"How...?" he started, probably referring to how easily Anakin had broken through the natural Force bubble that usually stopped other Force users from attacking directly.

Anakin didn't even bother to try and answer. Instead, he wrapped himself in the familiarity of the storm of anger and hate and rage, gathering it to him with a firm, unyielding will.

"Do you think I would just let him go on if I had any other choice?" Another wave of his hand and Dooku shot towards him through the air, not by his own power. Anakin rammed his fist into the man's stomach as he came by. He felt the metal extension bend and warp with the impact and berated himself. He must have forgotten to reinforce the metal with the Force. Sloppy of him. He would have to fix it before Master discovered and punished him for it.

Anakin watched as the Count flew back and slammed into the wall. Eyes wide and stunned, although that blow would have severely injured a normal man. He must have protected himself at the last

moment. A shame.

The older man began to fall to the floor and Anakin darted forward. Before the Count could reach the metal grating lining the walkway, The former Sith was there. He raised his leg and kicked Dooku, enhancing the kick with the Force and making sure to reinforce the metal this time. Again, the Count shot back and rammed into a different wall before finally falling to the grungy ground.

"Here you are, full of more power than you know what to do with, but the reality is, you are nothing," he hissed as he advanced on Dooku's groaning form. The man managed to somehow get to his knees at least and reached out, grabbing those same crates he'd crashed into earlier with the Force and throwing them at Anakin.

The former Sith actually laughed at the pathetic move, waving another hand and sending those boxes away to smash harmlessly at random points in the hallway easily. The older man's grasp on the dark side was so new; he honestly had very little idea how to really utilize it. There was no way he could possibly overpower a Sith Lord. Typical arrogant Jedi.

Dooku's lightsaber appeared in his hand, but before he could turn it on, Anakin reached out and grabbed it with the Force, piercing through the other's natural Force bubble again (let him know the futility of his actions – of standing against The Chosen One) and ripping the cylinder out of his hand. The other man's eyes widened in shock.

"If this paltry display is all you have to show, then he will annihilate you."

The Count grit his teeth and thrust his hands out, sending a wave of the dark side at Anakin, who scoffed. Did he honestly think he could get through to him with that? Although, now that the advantage of surprise and the resulting shock had been lost, Anakin likely wouldn't be able to affect the former Jedi with the Force anymore. Well, not as easily, but there were other ways. He'd already made his point there anyway.

Good thing he had Dooku's lightsaber. He found it amusing how that likely wouldn't have happened if the former Jedi had been using the Force as normal.

He switched it on. A blue blade stretched away from his hand. He frowned at it for a moment. It was the wrong color. And its handle

was too short... and curved.

Ah, well. One had to work with what they had.

Dooku held his stomach as he scowled up at the figure towering over him.

"Do you still think you even stand a chance against him?" the time traveler asked.

The Count's jaw clenched tighter. "How... do you have this much power?" he asked, and Anakin smirked at the underlying tone of fear. Good. Maybe he'd finally understand his place.

"Do you comprehend now?" the former Sith asked pointedly, holding the lightsaber out in front of him.

Dooku backed away slowly, still on guard.

"Answer me!" Anakin bellowed.

The Count didn't want to. Anakin could tell. He could also relate. Every single Sith apprentice had to be taught humility by their superiors. It was how the cycle worked.

"Yes," Dooku finally said through gritted teeth.

"Good," he couldn't help the pleased, superior tone in his voice. "Now kneel before—"

A hand on his arm – two, actually – clutching at it, practically hanging from it, cut him off. He looked down to see a wide-eyed Siri staring up at him. He hadn't sensed her? Why hadn't he sensed her? Then he realized she held no malice in her. Honestly, it looked like she was barely standing right now anyway. That was why he hadn't sensed her – or had, but dismissed her as no threat. A mistake.

"Anakin," she gasped. "You... promised."

It was obviously taking everything in her to get the words out.

For a moment, he blinked at her, then went to shake her off of his arm. How dare she—

"Remember, Anakin," she grit out. "Remember... Luke... you promised. Padmè... Luke... Leia..."

Anakin stared at her, and the faces of the names of the people who were the lights of his life – who he would do anything for – flashed in front of his mind's eye.

For a moment, one dreadful, timeless moment, nothing happened.

Then, once again, he released his grip on his anger and hate, practically shoving it away from him. The darkness slipped away, leaving nothing but emptiness in its wake, as it always did.

They stood there for several seconds, Anakin still facing down a wide-eyed former Jedi as his mind strove to process and simultaneously reject what had just happened. When was the last time he'd slipped that badly? When was the last time he'd actually embraced the darkness... despite everything.

Wasn't he supposed to be over this?!

He felt sick, and wanted to collapse, crawl away into a corner and hide from everything, but he knew if he did anything remotely close, Dooku, recently turned and now thoroughly humiliated, would likely pounce on him, seeing it as the sign of weakness that it would be. It took all of his remaining strength to continue standing, and he was once again very grateful for his mask.

Siri slumped a little, taking deep breaths in relief. Then she reached up and slowly took the lightsaber out of Anakin's hand before turning it off.

"Thank you," she whispered. He wondered why, because (yet again) he should be thanking her. Yet again, she'd dragged him back, kicking and screaming, from the darkness.

Then she turned to Dooku. "Do you still want to take out Palpatine?"

The Count looked between Siri and Anakin for several seconds before nodding. "I do."

They couldn't trust him. Not completely. Not anymore (not that they had until this point). With how the dark side twisted one's mind, there was just no way to tell exactly where he stood. Anakin forced himself to try and sense something deceptive from the man. He strained, but felt nothing.

"Then get us the information we need to condemn him," Siri said as she held out Dooku's lightsaber to the man. Warily, as if she or Anakin

would attack him, the former Jedi cautiously reached out and took the weapon. Then he carefully clipped it back onto his belt.

"Who is Anakin?" he asked after another long pause.

Anakin didn't think it was possible for him to stiffen anymore. He was wrong. His muscles began to ache. He welcomed the pain. Was he shaking? He couldn't tell.

Siri looked back at him, as if expecting him to answer.

Well, he heard her in his mind, causing him to start slightly. Right. She stood next to him, easily close enough for them to speak telepathically. Through the bond...

What had he just done to her?

He didn't respond, either aloud or in his mind. He wasn't sure he could.

Siri must have realized she wouldn't get an answer, because she sighed and turned back to Dooku. "Anakin is... was a little boy who grew up too fast and met a rather... disturbing end – he never stood a chance." Anakin blinked. Did Siri actually believe that? Either way, Dooku's gaze turned to Anakin and softened ever so slightly. As much as someone in the thrall of the dark side ever could, in any case.

"I see."

The former Sith wasn't sure what the older man saw (or thought he saw). He could barely keep up with the conversation right now. It was difficult enough to keep up this facade of strength, and even now, he had to draw liberally on the Force to help keep him going at all. Somehow, he managed it.

"We will get in touch with you again. Thank you for your time," Siri said with a slight bow. Anakin didn't dare move for fear that he'd just keep going until he hit the ground.

"And to you," Dooku returned with a graceful bow of his own, even if he still looked and felt wary.

Good. Maybe he wouldn't be quite so power drunk in the future.

Except... the price paid to rein him in...

Anakin clenched his fists harder, focusing on the duraplast and metal

digging into his fingers. Breathe, he told himself, counting backwards from 20 in Rodian. Vaguely, he realized that right now would be a good time to squeeze a stress ball... too bad he hadn't brought it. It hadn't even occurred to him to grab it before he left the temple.

Dooku walked away, disappearing down the hall, but Anakin didn't move. Neither did Siri. Not until they both felt him get far enough away that he had to have caught an air taxi.

That was when Anakin finally felt safe enough to let go. It hurt when his knees hit the ground due to his stilts, and he couldn't even catch himself decently because of his arm extensions. He managed to stop himself from falling onto his face, but it was a near thing. It occurred to him that he should have just let himself fall and break his nose or something. After all, it was the absolute least he deserved.

Then Siri was there, kneeling in front of him.

"Anakin? Are you hurt?"

No. He didn't hurt nearly enough, actually. A weakling like him deserved so much more pain... No matter what Girth or Xio said. Obi-Wan had to have sent him back to torture him, and he was right to do so. Anakin gasped, feeling like he was drowning in the air, and suddenly the mask was just too much, especially without the respirator to regulate his breathing. He needed it *off. Now.*

He reached up to try and grab it, but he'd somehow forgotten in the last ten seconds that his hands were still encased in their extensions and wouldn't actually be able to grab anything, but he wasn't sure he had the presence of mind to consciously use said extensions to grab the mask.

Then two hands reached out and took the mask off, letting the comparatively cooler air of the building touch his face.

"Anakin, breathe with me," Siri said firmly. "Slow down, or you'll pass out."

Was that a bad thing?

And yet, a part of him needed to cling to her words and he grasped onto them as if they would save his very life.

"In, two, three, four, hold." He followed her instructions, holding his breath as she began to count for him again, up to fifteen. "Out, two,

three, four. In, two, three, four, hold," and the process continued until the panicked edge wore off several minutes later.

"I'm sorry," he was finally able to croak, not looking at her face. He felt her surprise, and then acceptance.

"Oh, Anakin..." she started softly.

"I'm so sorry!" he repeated and a sob tore itself from his throat, making him feel even weaker. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry," he repeated over and over again as hot tears began to stream down his cheeks.

Then he felt arms come around him and pull him close to her chest, petting the back of his head gently... just like his mother used to do.

He was so shocked, he stopped crying for several seconds.

"It will be okay," he heard her whisper.

Then his mind started working again and he realized that as much as he didn't deserve something like this, he needed it – and she was willingly stepping out of her comfort zone to give it to him. Everything wasn't okay now, but she said that it would be with such conviction... It overwhelmed him all over again and he clumsily wrapped his arms around her waist and let the tears come.

He didn't know how long they just sat there in the middle of the hallway as he poured his frustration and anger and grief into the water spilling down his cheeks. These weren't like the tears he'd cried earlier, in Girth's session. Those had been cleansing. These... he wasn't sure what these were, except unstoppable.

He even wondered when he'd become so uncontrollably emotional. Anakin Skywalker hadn't cried. Darth Vader certainly hadn't either. Yet Anakin the time-traveler – the child – did, apparently. There was a release in crying he'd never realized before. Part of him wondered if he deserved to feel that release – or even the cleansing he'd felt earlier – but he doubted he could stop at this point anyway. Everything inside of him just came pouring out and nothing short of the end of the universe could stop it now.

Eventually, he felt cried out and he found himself shuddering to a halt. They sat there for several more seconds in silence while he tried to gather the broken pieces of his soul up again. When he finally moved to push away from Siri, he found her smiling sadly, but warmly

at him.

"Hey," she said softly, "let's get those stilts off you, eh?"

Sniffing, and feeling very much like the child his body was, Anakin could only nod.

xXx

Palpatine had long since gone back to work after he'd set up a series of alerts on the traffic holos. Every now and then, he'd look up to observe what had set off one of the sensors, but hadn't seen many who match the figure he'd torn from the assassin's memory. He marked each one that resembled the man anyway, making sure the traffic holos followed him. The bounty hunters had been all over the district, according to them, but hadn't been thorough enough.

He'd been looking for new mercenaries anyway.

Still, he was determined to get his work done before the morning. He also still had some training to do later... and as much as he wanted to rush out and confront Vader, that was not a good idea at this point, not when he knew so little. And besides, Vader was powerful. The kind of power only spoken about in legends and prophecies. It was... intoxicating to imagine that kind of power at his side, and maddening to imagine it pitted against him.

He'd almost finished up for the evening when the night secretary pinged his comm.

"Yes?" he asked as calmly as he could. He was pleased that he heard no malice or contempt in his voice.

"Sir, Count Dooku of Serreno is here to see you."

Palpatine blinked. Then he smiled.

"Send him in."

Deciding he could push everything else back to tomorrow, he put the data work aside and turned to look out the window, composing himself and letting his mask drop. He heard the door open and felt the familiar presence of the Count – now tainted with the deliciousness of darkness – step inside.

"I see you've finally seen and embraced the truth," he said as he turned

the chair back to face the man walking into his office.

Dooku shrugged nonchalantly. "I ran into an opponent I couldn't handle. It was either choose the darkness or die. I chose to live."

"And then he unleashed his true power."

The other man blinked before looking to the side slightly, frowning. "Yes."

"Yet you escaped."

Dooku's frown deepened. "Only because someone else got in the way. A bounty hunter named Zora."

Palpatine took that information in and filed it away. Then he leaned forward, allowing the darkness to bleed into his eyes.

"Tell me, how did you find him?"

The Count studied Palpatine for a moment before he smiled and took a seat himself. "That is an interesting story. You see, I can now confirm to you, for certain, that the 'Darth Vader' you've been searching for is indeed Luke Lars."

Sidious smiled.

xXx

Girth didn't often get calls in the middle of the night these days. Seeing as he only had one patient currently, he knew immediately that something had gone dreadfully wrong.

Blinking the sleepiness out of his eyes, he reached over and his paw found the comm going off.

"Hello?" he asked groggily.

"Anakin and Siri have just arrived at the Temple," Tai'k said. "She just called me... Anakin had a relapse."

That made Girth sit up. "What?" he asked.

"Meet us at the usual room as soon as you can," she said. "Please," she added on as an after thought that he appreciated. She was used to giving orders in situations like this, apparently.

"Of course," he complied, already scurrying out of his blanket nest and heading for his closet. "I'll see you in a couple of minutes."

"Thank you," she replied. "Over and out."

The mind healer sighed and wondered exactly what would greet him this time.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Short but hopefully worth the wait. Thank you to Carradee, Quathis and Khalthar for their help with this!

I'd like to remind you all that Anakin is an unreliable narrator... Just saying.

SO, FFVII... I can't play it because of the webcomic contest! NOOOOO!

Instead I've been writing FFVII fanfiction in my break times *ahem*. What? I like fanfiction? You couldn't tell? Oh. So, you may expect some of that to pop up here soon... one of them will be a time travel... of course. Okay, I have two FFVII time travels in the works, but only one of them will likely see the site. The other story I have is kind of a 'read it/play it' fic, except, hopefully, done well. I've seen SO many of those that just rehash what happens in the game, and while I do like a good reaction, I don't think that's all that makes a good fic.

And this is while I take breaks from the webcomic... of which I don't even have one full episode done. This... might not be something I can do... but I'm still gonna try! If anyone would like to trial run that one... and I can figure out how to get it to where people can see it (Deviantart maybe?), let me know!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Let's try this a THIRD time.

AO3: Some e-mails might get lost in this maintenance period.

Me: By some... you mean all?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Girth was actually the first person to the therapy room. He was fine with that as he could make sure the everything was ready, with the lights on and he had some left-over confections he'd taken out of the stasis storage. He arranged them on the table and then sat down and waited.

After a few minutes, he rose to his feet and began to pace. Anakin had been doing so well. A relapse now... was not a good thing, mainly due to the timing. After all, relapses happened. It was a part of healing and something that could ultimately help the patient in the future. No, the problem stemmed from the fact that he knew the Chancellor would be expecting his newest assistant to be there this week. Could Anakin handle it? Somehow, especially with this relapse, he didn't think so.

A couple of minutes later, the door opened and Siri Tachi walked in. Her blond hair looked mussed and matted, and her clothes seemed askew, like she'd just thrown them on. She looked disheveled, despite some rather nice makeup and… was that a tattoo? He blinked, filed that away and studied the rest of the group as they followed.

Behind her walked Anakin... and Girth immediately knew that this would be a long emergency session. He'd seen Anakin depressed before, but not *despondent.* He once again mourned for the lost progress. All of his growth seemed like it had been washed away and the boy had somehow sunken even lower than before. He knew that wasn't the case, that some permanent progress was still there, but still…

At least when Girth had first started there had been a spark of defiance, even if it had been in a very unhealthy form of anger. Now he just stared at the floor in front of him, although his eyes did not seem to be fixed on anything. His hands gripped each other tightly, white-knuckled and likely in danger of breaking each other if the

shaking were anything to go by. He wasn't dressed in normal Jedi clothes under the standard Jedi robe, either. Was that significant? Girth couldn't help but think so... but it also probably wasn't the time to ask.

Maybe it would all be explained to him anyway.

The next person to shuffle in was Master Yoda, and Girth felt his third surprise of the night. He'd never seen the Jedi Master looking depressed. Just what was going on?

Finally, Master Xio followed everyone, shutting the door behind her. Wordlessly, everyone took a seat in the sitting area. No one seemed to even notice the refreshments.

"Siri," the Jedi mind healer started, "you called us. Can you tell us what happened?"

Girth approved of her getting information out of the only person who seemed to actually be somewhat together. They were here on behalf of Anakin, though, and judging from how the time-traveler looked... they'd have to address him directly at some point, no matter what. Fortunately, they could give him some time. Girth just hoped it would be enough.

The knight sighed, running a hand through her hair, or tried to. Her fingers got too caught to really comb through it. "Count Dooku contacted us... well, Anakin, a couple of days ago, asking to meet. We weren't entirely sure he should, but we figured if I tagged along for backup...

"Turns out he hasn't gotten far in his espionage, and was pretty sure if he stayed where he was, he'd end up Falling. He wanted to do so on his own terms and asked us for help."

Girth felt his eyes go wide and his jaw dropped in surprise. He didn't really understand the difference between the dark and light sides of the Force. It had been explained to him, but he couldn't really comprehend how a universal, cosmic Force could have two different 'sides'. It was something that he accepted simply because he had no other context to draw from.

However, he knew the connotations. This idea of Falling wasn't something most Force-sensitives would *want*... Especially if they were as knowledgeable as Jedi Masters were supposed to be. It was something Anakin shied away from with a fervor that bordered on

phobia at times. Why would someone actively seek this 'dark side' out? Simply to stay under cover? Would that be worth it? Somehow, he didn't think so.

"Naturally," Siri continued, "we didn't want to help him do something like that... but then we spoke to Master Yoda, who was convinced that if his former apprentice didn't get the help he needed, he'd attempt to do it himself and our entire situation could end up infinitely worse if Dooku Fell hard and fast, so he asked if we could possibly help. We decided to try, set up a time and a place and..."

She pause and took a deep breath before continuing. "It worked. Not initially, of course, but eventually..."

Yoda's ears drooped even more. He looked the very image of an old man in mourning. Yet it took all of Girth's self-restraint to not continue to stare in incredulity at the Jedi Master. He was 900 years old. Wasn't he supposed to know better than to put one person's needs ahead of another's so blatantly and (dare he think it) needlessly? Although, judging from the look on the Jedi Master's face, he realized he'd made a grave error of judgment. They'd likely have to address that ASAP too...

He really didn't think Jedi would be this... well, he wasn't sure there was a word for it. Sapient? Human? Imperfect? Just... not what he expected. He probably should have been prepared for this, though.

"In any case," Siri went on, drawing the drall's attention again, "he got on a bit of a power high and wanted to go and confront Sidious tonight." Girth felt the blood drain from his face and was glad that he, unlike the other beings in the room, had fur to cover it. From the look on Siri's face, the other adults had similar reactions. Anakin had explained – multiple times – how Darth Sidious was no pushover, but a duelist who could put most if not all of the Jedi Order to shame. He also tended to plan for contingencies and they would have to have some pretty damning evidence to actually convince any jury. He was also, more often than not, fairly well protected against assassinations at any given moment (and Girth had been rather worried they'd had to bring that particular point up...).

"You said he was on a power high, but could Count Dooku have defeated the Chancellor?" he asked cautiously.

"No," Siri replied with a shake of her head. "He's an excellent duelist, but Sidious uses more than just his lightsaber to fight. It's part of what

makes him so dangerous."

"Words, he uses," Yoda commented quietly.

"Among other things," Siri nodded. "He has contingencies for contingencies, and it is very difficult to keep up with him. He's had decades to work out potential problems that may get in the way of his planning, and he's good at preparing."

"I'm going to stop us right now before we get off topic," Xio cut in, shooting another worried glance at a very silent, very still Anakin. Girth felt a little abashed, allowing himself to be sidetracked like that. It wasn't something that happened often, but he had been woken in the middle of the night. Perhaps that was why he was finding it a little more difficult than normal to concentrate? If so, he was getting old and rusty. He gathered himself and focused on the conversation again as Xio turned to the youngest woman in there. "Please, continue, Siri."

The blond nodded. "I don't know exactly why, but him going to confront Sidious with or without us..." she paused and glanced warily at the boy sitting by her side, "it set Anakin off."

Girth frowned. "What do you mean by 'setting him off', exactly." If he didn't know what had gone on, he couldn't help. Didn't stop the fact that he knew he was walking on thin ice...

"I Fell," Anakin said, his voice hoarse. "Again."

The Force users in the room all stiffened at that, although Siri looked more sympathetic than horrified, and Master Yoda seemed to shrink in on himself even more. Girth filed that away for later.

"Oh, Anakin..." Master Xio said.

Girth frowned. They'd discussed Anakin's 'Fall' before, but he was under the impression that that was behind them now... No, he was missing something. He'd best start at the basics. "I... believe my current definition of 'Falling' may be lacking. What exactly does it entail?"

"I became Darth Vader again," the boy sat there, staring straight ahead, hands fisted so tightly on his legs they trembled. Actually, his whole body shook. He looked stiff and brittle, like he'd break at the slightest touch.

The drall still felt like he wasn't grasping the whole picture.

Understandable, seeing as he wasn't Force-sensitive, but still... "To my knowledge, 'Darth Vader' is a name and nothing more. Why does using the 'dark side' suddenly make you so different as to claim what is sounding almost like an alternate personality?" Because he hadn't thought Anakin's desire to disassociate from his past was *that* severe... But the time-traveler was too old to develop DID, even without taking his future memories into account. So it couldn't be that... right?

Girth really wanted something he could nibble on himself at that moment... or some caff. He should have gotten some before he came. And the confections on the table were soft, made for humans and not drall (who tended to like harder things to nibble on, soft was very unappealing, and he might need something more than a short burst of sugar followed by a crash that his body would most definitely feel).

Anakin blinked, opened his mouth, then closed it again and shook his head at Girth's inquiry, like he couldn't explain. Likely his state of mind – and him understanding that was a positive sign, even if it tended to be frustrating to the non-force-sensitive mind healer at the moment. Siri had calmly reached a hand out to rest on his shoulder and wasn't looking at Girth. So finally, the drall turned to Xio.

The woman sighed. "I was going to present my findings later, but I suppose presenting it to those here now would help more. In my study of the dark side, I've come to the conclusion that the Force does indeed have a sentience." That seemed to get the attention of everyone in the room. She didn't acknowledge the scrutiny as she continued. "It isn't sapience, I can find no real evidence of conscious thought, even though this has been a debate among Jedi scholars for centuries. Still, in my study of the dark side and its effects, I've amassed evidence behind the saying 'the will of the Force'."

"Jedi say that all the time, though," Siri said. "I've always been taught to follow the will of the Force."

Xio nodded. "I think most Jedi see it as more of an acknowledgment of the larger picture – how everything is connected, and the smallest effect can lead to other, far larger incidents, and because the universe is immersed in the Force, it can show us those instances or how to avoid them. I know I've thought of it as more of an incredibly intricate math equation and we just get the overflow of the most likely conclusions when we see visions and such."

"Hence why the future is never set in stone," Siri said thoughtfully. "The math equation would change all the time. I suppose your

definition fits the 'Will of the Force' as it was taught."

"I now think the Will of the Force is far more than that, though," Xio said. "If it were nothing but a simple – or even complex – math equation, why is there a dark side? Most scholars pass this off as the residue and influence of negative emotions, but from my discussions with and studies of the Sith holocrons, I've come to the conclusion that it must have an actual will of its own. It is more than just a byproduct of negative emotion because it actually *changes* the way a person thinks. From what I've discussed with Anakin and observed myself, the darkness actually and actively twists one's thought process. Again, this is a theory, but I've studied holo recordings of people in the process of falling. We don't have many of them, but they do exist, and I've noticed that a person can say one thing at the beginning of their Fall and be completely devoted to the opposite once that Fall is more complete. Sometimes that takes minutes, sometimes it takes longer, but no matter how slowly, the change of opinion happens far faster than it naturally should.

"The Darkness draws people and will change those who embrace it to keep them there... like a sentient drug, I suppose."

A snort from Anakin had everyone glancing at him for a moment before turning their attention back to Xio once it became obvious that was all he was willing to contribute at this point.

"The thing is, I say 'sentience'... but even then I don't think that is quite the word for it. It's so much... *larger* than that. Not necessarily more complex, but all-encompassing at the same time. Everything that happens in a Fall – the twisting, the addiction, the power burst – the effects are consistent enough to be a natural – or perhaps instinctual is a better word – side effect of channeling the dark side. From what I've been able to gather of the dark side – or the Force in general – the effects point to something similar to how animals have instincts. This one just affects everything that touches it."

Girth felt his eyebrows raise even higher than they had been before. "Are you saying that the Force is an invisible animal that encompasses the universe?" he asked. "Or two animals, one that represents kindness and peace while the other is an addictive, sentient drug that just wants to draw more power to itself?"

The older woman frowned. "I think even that is far too... simple and just doesn't encompass enough of the Force... but if that helps, then yes.

"In any case, Anakin has experienced that mental twisting. When he channels the dark side, his entire thought-process changes, you see?"

Yes, Girth did see. Well, better than he had before. It was sounding a more and more like DID, though... which was rather distressing.

"Thank you for the explanation." He eyed Anakin carefully, "So, are we looking at a sort of 'detox' stage for this? To continue the drug analogy."

Anakin seemed to withdraw into himself even more. "There is no 'detox' stage," he whispered. "'Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.' There is no escape."

Girth stiffened himself. They had to nip that in the bud ASAP. Fortunately, he wasn't the only one to think that.

"And yet, here you are, fully aware of the changes you went through, and cognoscente of the consequences," Master Xio countered.

Anakin shook his head. "I knew what the consequences would be this time. I know what it does and I still chose it... even after all these years of supposed healing..."

"Anakin," Girth said softly, "cravings for death sticks and spice never go away once one uses them. And when it comes to emotional therapy, we expect back-shuffling and reversions. It's a natural part of learning to heal. This is not unexpected." Even if it did come at a *very* inconvenient time.

"The important thing is that you stopped as soon as you realized what you were doing," Xio agreed. "You *keep coming back*. You've Fallen multiple times now, you likely will again, but you actively choose to return, and that is no small thing." The way she spoke sounded like she'd gotten more details before they'd shown up. He'd have to ask her for those tidbits later as now really wasn't a good time.

The former Sith looked up carefully, and Girth had never seen him looking so fragile... which said a lot.

"It's... okay... to use the dark side?" he asked, confused. "As long as I can come back?"

"No," Xio said softly, shaking her head. "That's not what I mean at all. But you've proven that it is possible to come back from it. So it isn't the end of the world either."

Anakin flinched a little. "But it is..."

Xio and Girth exchanged glances. "What do you mean?" the drall asked.

"If someone isn't there to... pull me back... I was a very large part of what destroyed the Republic and the Jedi Order – and consequently, half the galaxy! I'm the 'Chosen One'! The Universe's well-being *does* rest on my shoulders!"

Girth's brow furrowed. "'Chosen One'?" he asked.

The older mind healer sighed. "A reference to an ages-old prophecy."

The drall's jaw dropped. "Jedi have prophecies?" Then he frowned. "And nobody told me this?" That was kind of an important detail. "Why?"

Xio blinked. "Oh... it... never really occurred to me that you wouldn't know it. Most Jedi at least know of it. I've never had to explain it before. I apologize for the oversight."

He took a deep breath and put a paw to the bridge of his nose. "Moving back to the point at hand, even if you are some sort of fulfillment to a prophecy, I highly doubt that prophets know everything. Every choice you make will not affect the universe at large, and you cannot treat those decisions as if they will." Girth shook his head. "That's too much pressure for any single person – or even group of people. Do you think every single decision the Senate makes affects the entire galaxy? Some do, but most don't. What about the bill for more parking meters they spoke of the other day?"

Anakin didn't look convinced. "Somehow I think that me choosing to channel a mind-twisting, addictive darkness is one of those decisions, especially when I'm naturally far more powerful than most Force-sensitives." He wasn't even saying that to brag, but stated it simply; as if it was a fact.

"And yet, as Master Xio has pointed out, here you are. You have not killed in your 'Falling', you are still working to take down a great evil..."

"Not to mention you keep pulling off the impossible," Siri said, sounding tentatively amused. "And I'm not just talking physical stunts."

Anakin made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. It was weak, and still delicate, but definitely a step in the right direction. Then he looked down, any mirth he'd gained disappearing.

"I... can't help but hate myself for this, though. Not when I know better. Not when it's all my fault."

Oh, no. Blaming only himself for this? Not happening if Girth had anything to say about it. "I'm not saying you shouldn't be held responsible for your choices, but I would like to point out that I don't think you should have even been out there and put in that scenario to begin with." He shot a pointed look at Yoda who met his eyes and nodded. Good.

Anakin just kind of blinked, as if he couldn't completely wrap his head around that. "But... he needed help that only I could give."

"Perhaps," Girth conceded, "but would you have gone if Master Yoda hadn't asked you to?"

More blinking and a puzzled expression, as if he couldn't really put together why Girth was asking him that. Hmm, was that his natural state of mind interfering, or his young, undeveloped brain coming into play? Stang it, time travel made everything far more complicated than it should be. Which said quite a bit, right there.

"I... yes, probably."

Which would make this harder for him to see, but still... they had to try. Girth could plant a good seed if nothing else.

"That still doesn't negate the kind of pressure he put you under, especially considering the events of the past couple of days. He knew that, so by asking you to go, he sent a message that your state of mind was less important than Count Dooku's." He turned to the green Jedi. "Wouldn't you agree, Master?"

The Grandmaster seemed to slump down a little more, as if his shoulders bent under a great weight. Girth felt for him, he did, but the Jedi needed to understand the implications.

"My intention, it was not," he said quietly. Girth frowned and opened his mouth to say that intention or not, that's the message he sent. However, the old Master went on before he could say anything. "But understand, I do, why see it that way, you would. Known that, I should have."

Well, good, he did understand.

Master Yoda scooted out of the chair he'd taken residence in, then shuffled over to a flummoxed Anakin. Then he bowed low.

"My apologies, you have. Desperate, I was, to save my Padawan. Foolish, it was. Made his choice, he has."

Girth smiled. Well, that was a pleasant development.

Anakin just sat there, face blank as he processed this. Yoda didn't seem like the kind of person who apologized a lot. Probably his age and experience coming into play. This seemed like a lesson both of them needed to relearn.

Then, to his surprise and disappointment, Anakin blinked and shook his head. "No, it's fine."

"Anakin," Girth said, frowning and shooting a glance at Tai'k, who looked rather troubled herself. He could understand why she wouldn't want to speak out against her Grandmaster – probably more than a little learned conditioning, and he'd guess it was unintentional if anything. Most Jedi seemed to regard the old Master with a great deal of respect and fondness. So it was up to him. "It isn't fine. You shouldn't have been asked something like this considering recent events. Remember when I said that you can't be strong all the time? And it shouldn't be expected of you? It's up to your leaders and caretakers to understand when they're pushing you too hard. Pushing you is all well and good – it's a great way to get someone to grow – but you have to be in the proper head space to take advantage of that. Otherwise, it will just hurt you. Rather like trying to walk off a broken bone. You can't exercise it while it's healing, and even after that you have to take it carefully or you'll re-injure yourself – sometimes to a greater extent than before. The mind and psyche are no different."

The time-traveler looked troubled as he thought about that. Then he spoke softly. "Maybe... and I think I see what you mean... but you have to understand that coming back from the dark side is... I can't even begin to describe how difficult it is. I don't know if I have the ability to begin to describe it to even other Jedi, let alone someone who has only ever touched the Force indirectly. The only reason I was able to do it the first time was because I found someone who meant more to me than all my ideals, thoughts and pride. More than my anger and power. And I was only able to do that because he reached out and cared enough to not give up even when I rejected his offer

time and time again.

"Master Yoda..." he turned to the troll, who watched him with an expression somewhere between wary and surprised. "You showed me that you have the conviction – you might be able to bring him back. How could I not help?"

Well, that was a good hope for Anakin to have, certainly, but...

"It still isn't your responsibility," Girth insisted.

The former Sith shook his head. "I was the only one who had a chance to help him Fall in any sort of controlled manner."

"Despite not thinking it could work?" Siri asked quietly.

Girth shot her a grateful smile. That was more support he needed to help Anakin see.

He licked his lips. "Regardless, it still is not your responsibility, and certainly not something you should be pressured in to."

Anakin shook his head again. "The universe continues to move along regardless of my wishes. It won't wait for me to finally pull myself together. Palpatine *certainly* won't."

True, but he still felt like Anakin was missing his meaning. So Girth turned to Xio with a pointed look. The white-haired woman sighed.

"I think you both have good points. The universe does move on whether we're ready for it or not, and making steps to help someone return from the dark side – I can't see that as anything but good. However," she put up a hand to forestall any arguments or comments from her fellow mind healer, "I have to say that Girth is also right in that you were pressured into something you weren't ready for that did cause you harm, Anakin. Maybe you would have gone otherwise, but that goes to show your own state of mind more than anything else and it's one I cannot agree with. I think that is what Healer Girth is trying to point out."

Girth nodded firmly. She nodded back in appreciation before taking a breath. Then leaned forward, expression sad.

"You don't value your own life or sanity. You see it as somehow below others', which isn't true at all. You are important, Anakin, and not just because of a prophecy or your unique power in the Force. You are

important simply because you live. And living beings should be born with certain rights. You are just as important as Count Dooku, and Master Yoda did reinforce an unhealthy outlook, whether he meant to or not."

"No," Anakin protested, sounding more frustrated, "he was simply showing how he cares for someone. Dooku is important to him, and it shouldn't be any other way."

"Important to me, you are, young Anakin," Yoda said softly.

The initiate looked taken back at that. Whether it was Yoda actually using his name (Girth had never heard him call anyone by their first name and had figured it was a quirk of his... maybe not?) or the sentiment expressed was anyone's guess.

"Thank you for what you did – what you tried to do – I do, but asked it of you, I should not have. Blinded by my own desperation, I was. Sorry, I am. Deeply so." And he bowed again. Girth had to say he was impressed. The Jedi hadn't taken the easy way out and he'd shouldered his own share of the blame without hesitation. He could see why others would follow this being, flawed though he was.

The younger time-traveler just continued to stare at Yoda, mouth gaping like a fish. Well, that was better than the despondency that had been there earlier.

"Psst," Siri said in a stage whisper, "now is where you accept the apology and move on."

More blinking. "But... there is nothing to apologize for. My mother always said that people shouldn't apologize for caring." Now that was interesting. He sounded his physical age there, suggesting a reversion. It could be the natural inclination of his young body, but it felt more personal than that. He'd suspected there had been some trauma regarding Anakin's separation from his mother, but this suggested there was more than he'd realized. Or maybe it was something else to do with his mother? He made a mental note to ask Anakin later as now was definitely not the time.

"Apologize for caring, no," Girth agreed after a small pause. "Apologize for not thinking the situation through and putting someone else's needs ahead of yours when he should have known better or tried to come up with a different solution that was less trying to you – that he rightly apologized for." The mind healer had to give a nod to Yoda's mature way of handling the fall out if nothing else.

Siri rolled her eyes. "Just accept it. It'll make everyone feel better."

Anakin looked back at Master Yoda. "Er... apology accepted, I suppose."

"Thank you, I do," the old Master said. Then he turned and walked back to his chair, lifting himself up and onto it before settling into a somber pose. Girth gave him an approving nod as the old Master shuffled past.

Once they were all situated again, Girth looked over to Master Xio, and then to Anakin. "So... what kind of repercussions can we expect?"

Anakin slouched again in depression. "Sidious felt that. I'm positive. He was likely monitoring the area we were in. If he saw my face or recognized Siri..."

"Why would he know me?" Siri asked. "I'm not anything he was interested in before. And you had a hood covering your face."

"True, but Dooku..."

She shook her head. "He doesn't know me either and I'd taken my wig off before we'd exited the building. We'd also taken off all of your stilts and extensions. He would have been looking for a red-headed woman in bounty-hunter garb, not a blond in a clubbing outfit. He'd also be looking for a large man, not a child who could be said blond's little brother... or son." She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not that old, but he probably wouldn't know that from a holo recording."

"There's still a chance he'll put it together..." Anakin pointed out, his voice small.

"Then I vote to take Anakin out of the Ambassador program," Girth said firmly. He'd been looking for a way to bring that topic up. His (admittedly abrupt) comment seemed to surprise everyone, the former Sith most of all as he looked up quickly.

"What?" He seemed confused, as if he couldn't process what his mind healer had proposed.

"In that case, even if he does put it together, you will be well away from his influence," the drall pointed out.

"But... I..." the time-traveler started, looking unsure of himself and seeming so lost, such a contrast from the facade he usually put up. He

wasn't even making an attempt now. That was when Girth felt he really understood how much this whole situation had gotten to the time-traveler.

"This isn't your first regression, Anakin," Xio said kindly, "but it is your biggest one yet. You'll need time to work through it."

"Remember what we just spoke about in our last meeting?" Girth asked. "About how you need to learn to know where your limits are? And what pushing yourself too far too fast does?"

The boy's expression went from puzzled to pained and he looked down. "Yes."

"It's admirable that you tried, Anakin, but we knew you likely weren't ready. That's why we had contingencies in place," Xio pointed out.

The time-traveler didn't look up, but he did slump a little more as he nodded again.

"So we'll have Master Yoda make the arrangements, is that alright?" Girth asked.

"Make them, I can, if wish it, Initiate Skywalker does," the old Master said serenely.

"Anakin?" Siri asked.

The boy sighed and sat back, his rigid posture suddenly gone as he slumped against the couch cushions. "Very well." Then he shook his head harshly. "He wins again," he said bitterly.

At first Girth let out a breath of relief, and he expected something similar to show on the initiate's face. It never came, though. Instead, all he saw was even more frustration... followed by the despondency from when they'd first come in. That... wasn't right. He thought over Anakin's most recent words and frowned himself.

"What do you mean, 'He wins'?"

Anakin's face went blank as he spoke. "He always wins."

That... wasn't what Girth had been expecting. But in hindsight, he probably should have.

"This isn't a win for him, Anakin," Tai'k started, but Girth held up one finger of his paw. She nodded to him and closed her mouth.

"How is this a win for Palpatine?" Girth asked. "What is your definition of 'a win' against him?"

Anakin stared at him for several seconds, obviously unsure as to how to answer, or trying to put his answer into words.

"The Master wins when he breaks you," he finally said. "When you stop fighting back, even in your head. I've only ever known one person who has won against him."

"Who?" Siri asked, sounding surprised.

The smile the little boy gave belonged on an old face, not his youthful one, full of sadness, pain and nostalgia. "Padmé. I think that's why he hated her so much... She isn't even Force-Sensitive, didn't know anything about his plans at all, and she still won against him."

Girth really wanted to meet this woman, even if he didn't approve of Anakin's nigh hero-worship of her. Yet more mental notes to address later. Fortunately, he wasn't the only one who saw that for the potential side-track it was.

"You think that by leaving the program, he's broken you?" Master Xio asked carefully.

Anakin shrugged, a little too nonchalantly. "He drove me away, again, and has obstructed our goals."

"Which goals?" Tai'k asked with a frown.

"Getting information and proof of his true nature, keeping him away from the other initiates so he doesn't corrupt one of them," he paused, then shuddered. "He's going to subjugate the entire galaxy if we don't do something."

"Anakin," Girth pointed out. "It isn't your fault you weren't ready. You've been working so hard, and you've made more progress than we had any right to expect."

"I never would have been ready," the time-traveler replied with a sigh. "I just wasn't strong enough to push through." He looked off towards the side of the room blankly. "He broke me a long time ago. It was foolish of me to think otherwise."

Girth was about to point out that recovery in general didn't work like that, but Siri spoke up first.

"So, you throwing Palpatine down a reactor core shaft wasn't a 'win'?"

Anakin looked back at her, eyes wide. Girth's own eyebrows rose. Wait, what?

"Explain that, please," Xio said, sounding a little strained herself.

Siri shot Anakin a dry look. "That's how the Emperor died. Anakin killed him."

A little color returned to Anakin's cheeks and he seemed split between being pleased, embarrassed and frustrated. (Still a step up from the depression.) "Luke was distracting him."

"He was *killing* Luke and you chose to save your son, destroying the Emperor in the process. It was a conscious choice on your part. How can that not be a 'win'?"

"It was merely luck."

"You *know* there's no such thing as luck," Siri returned, sounding exasperated.

"The will of the Force, then," Anakin said, definitely sounding annoyed. Girth almost wanted to sigh in relief. Despite his words, the boy hadn't given in yet.

Silence, before Siri asked slowly, "And what is the Force telling you now?"

Anakin's annoyance melted away. He seemed to be pleading with her, their gazes locked, for several seconds before he spoke up. "It's telling me to go back."

"And that isn't your history or background speaking?" she asked, bluntly. Girth wanted to facepalm. Somehow, he didn't think Siri would make a very good therapist, even if she seemed to be good for Anakin.

To his credit, though, the former Sith thought about it. "No," he finally said, sounding firmer than he had since he'd walked into the room. It still wasn't up to his usual confidence, but Girth would take it.

"And do you think you'll be able to do that – face him and put on an act?" Siri asked. "Even with everything that has happened today?"

No answer for several seconds, and the silence felt thick enough to cut

with a vibroblade.

"I... don't know," Anakin said, his voice shaking. But then the child's face firmed up in determination. "But this won't just go away."

Girth spoke up, frowning. "We don't expect it to. But, in the week and a half since you saw the Chancellor for the first time, you have had at least one major breakdown, one major reversion, multiple small instances of each and several nightmares. You can't possibly think that going back to him is a good idea, still."

Anakin shook his head. "Putting aside the fact that I'm the one who has the most chance of succeeding in gaining the information we need, if I back out now, I'll still know he's there, corrupting some other potential Jedi, and my withdrawal will be suspicious to say the least. Knowing he'll suspect something will put me on edge as much as, if not even more than, I am now." The fact that he could realize that was actually another very positive thing, so Girth didn't interrupt, even if he wasn't happy with where this was headed.

The former Sith's hands tightened into fists. "After all of this, I'd prefer to know where he is and who he's in contact with, I think."

"Anakin," Girth said softly, "You're pushing yourself too hard again. Can you honestly tell me that walking into that room with him when you've admitted that you have negative feelings towards yourself and your actions regarding him is a good idea?"

Silence, and then a sigh. "No. But I do think it's a better option than the alternative. Taking me out of the program will just enhance my paranoia. I can admit that this... may not have been the best idea, but going through with it is the least I can do to make up for the sins I have committed."

Girth grit his teeth. He could argue against self-sacrifice. He could argue against duty. He could even argue against the paranoia point. But absolution... That was something Anakin needed. Desperately. Girth still didn't think he was ready for this, but it was Anakin's choice. He would not undermine months and months of work by not honoring that choice.

That didn't mean he wouldn't offer his opinion.

"I still don't think you're ready," he said. It felt like an old argument, probably because it was. It was also just as valid now as it had ever been. Perhaps more so, even.

The sardonic smile crossing the boy's mouth held no mirth. "I never disagreed with that."

Well, at least he seemed more stable and self-aware than he had been earlier.

"When you come into your next session, we're going to discuss your extreme levels of self-hatred," Girth could only really mutter. Maybe he was just too tired right now? He was going to petition for a caff machine in this room. Maybe a way to make tea too? Just for instances like this.

Then the mind healer let out another long sigh. "But, I will always support you, Anakin, even if I can't agree with your choices."

Was it his imagination, or did some of the darkness recede from the boy's eyes?

"Also," Xio said, smiling, "you may have channeled the dark-side tonight, but I think we can still take something good from this. I think this stemmed from you taking your current, far healthier state for granted, Anakin, and you can't do that anymore. This is something that you will likely have to fight for the rest of your life. But... if anyone can fight it, I think it's you. Your mental fortitude is... awe inspiring."

And Jedi, it seemed, worked well at all hours of the night too. Stang Force users.

Anakin still looked vulnerable as his gaze shifted to Xio, then he just blinked at her, as if to say, 'Really?'

She raised one white eyebrow. "I mean it, Anakin. I wouldn't have said it otherwise."

The initiate's smile was small but real, and Girth took that as a win.

"Thank you," Anakin said softly. "I... needed to hear that."

"Of course," Xio said.

"Well," Girth decided to cut in. "You seem to be doing better. Will you be alright if we send you off to bed?"

Anakin closed his eyes for a second, and Girth appreciated him really considering the question.

"Yes," he finally said. "I... don't think I'm just... I mean this will take a while to work through, won't it?"

Both Girth and Xio nodded. Especially with his next meeting with Palpatine coming up in a couple of days.

"But... I think I'll be okay... tonight."

And Girth believed him.

"Good," the mind healer said as he rose and yawned. "That's a load off of my mind then. Shall we?" he gestured to the door.

"What about the food?" Siri asked, pointing to the table and the largely untouched confections.

"Right," Girth said, going to gather it. "Go on. I'll finish up here."

A couple of minutes later, he left the now empty room, heading back to his quarters with an arm-full of pastries. He had to get these to his storage unit. They'd likely be useful in the next session he had.

xXx

Master Yoda, Siri and Anakin parted ways with Master Xio, who said she would likely be getting up soon anyway and wanted to start on her morning work. Anakin didn't comment on the work-a-holic tendency. Obi-Wan had done that so many times, and he knew when to pick his battles. The other three turned to shuffle off towards their quarters.

"Um... could we swing by the Clawmouse clan before we head back to the Thranta clan?" Anakin asked. "I can tell that Snips isn't happy right now."

Siri raised an eyebrow at him. "Can you usually tell when one of us," she paused, "I mean one of those you share a bond with, is having difficulties?"

Anakin shook his head. "I'm not usually looking, but after the last couple of... problems I've had, Ahsoka hasn't been too happy with me, so I checked. She's probably up crying."

"Hmm. Help her, we should," Master Yoda said as he hobbled along. He made a turn towards the lifts.

Quietly, the other two followed him. Anakin couldn't help but marvel

at how much better he felt now than he had earlier. After he'd realized what he'd done, he'd almost drowned in despair. It had been difficult to breathe correctly and he'd gone back to almost wishing for his respirator again. Almost.

But Girth informing him that they had expected back-sliding and regressions had been a bit of a pleasant surprise. He didn't think regressions would be a natural part of healing, but now that he thought about it, sometimes someone had to stop training to heal, and wasn't that like a physical regression? And didn't Master Xio say that the mind and body were the same? Or, at least that they healed the same. He wasn't sure he believed that, but he could believe they acted similarly.

Girth offering his support had been... stabilizing. Anakin couldn't really describe it in any other way, and he appreciated the concessions the drall had made. That couldn't have been easy.

And Master Xio pointing out that some good could still come from this... well, he thought that was a little optimistic, but the whole experience had driven home the fact that he couldn't let his guard down. He couldn't just pretend he'd never fallen and move on, or the darkness would claim him again. It was a little disheartening to realize that Master Yoda was right in that his experiences with the dark side would indeed influence – if not outright dictate – the rest of his life, but somehow, he felt more prepared to meet that challenge now. Which was strange as he'd felt rather the opposite not an hour earlier.

Mind-healing was really far more helpful than he'd realized.

They entered the lifts in silence, then exited on the Clawmouse Clan floor, approaching the door with only their faint footsteps echoing down the large hallways.

Anakin saw that there was, indeed, a light on, far after 'bed time' hours and had to hide a small wince.

They knocked on the door (Anakin wondered why as usually he just walked in, but figured it had something to do with the current time) and it opened a couple of seconds later. The same crechemaster from before, Master Kobola, stood in the frame, night-tunics and a bath robe tied around her and her red-hair sticking out like a fuzzy cloud. In her arms, she held an obviously distraught Togruta youngling.

"Master Yoda," she said with surprise. "What can I do for you?"

"Worried, we were, that having problems, you might be."

Master Kobola narrowed her eyes at them suspiciously, and if it had been just Anakin, or even Anakin and Siri, she might have asked *how* they knew. However, seeing Master Yoda standing there, serene as ever, she just sighed.

"I see." Then she patted the little girl's back. "Ahsoka, Anakin's here."

The girl, whose head had been resting on the woman's shoulders, whipped around so quickly Anakin was surprised she didn't give herself whiplash.

"You!" she yelled, pointing at Anakin.

"Ahsoka! You need to be quieter! The other children are sleeping,' Master Kobola admonished.

The girl looked a little abashed for a moment, but then she turned back to Anakin.

"You liar!" she said, voice quieter but still angry. Then she seemed to break down, tears welling up in her eyes. "You said you'd try! That I could keep you warm but... it's *always* cold! And you weren't here! I couldn't stop it!"

Anakin slumped a little, the depression he'd almost chased off earlier coming back at the little girl's words.

"I'm so sorry, Ahsoka," he said softly. "I wish you didn't have to feel that."

Before the little girl could respond, the crechemaster cut in, putting her one free hand on her hip.

"Alright, I've had enough. This has been going on for far too long for me to not know what is happening here."

She glared at them and, yet again, made Anakin feel like a chastised child. Kriff, she was good.

Anakin glanced at Siri and Yoda. The former just shrugged helplessly, while the latter nodded. He let out a sigh.

"Ahsoka and I have a bond," he said. Master Kobola's eyes widened.

"How?" she asked.

Yeah, he wasn't about to divulge that. "I'm... not entirely sure."

"With his mind-healing lately," Siri cut in, sensing Anakin's growing distress (he greatly appreciated that), "he's been having some relapses, and we think some of that is spilling over to Ahsoka."

The crechemaster's eyes narrowed again. "What kind of relapses?"

He found himself caught flat-footed for a moment. What kind of answer could he give that didn't throw everything he'd been trying to keep under wraps out the window for the Galaxy to see?

Then he remembered what he had initially been treated for when he'd gone to the mind-healing sessions. Yeah, that should work.

"I was raised as a slave," he said, lifting his chin up and putting his hands behind his back. Then he realized that that's what Vader would do and consciously had to relax his stance. He tried to remain confident as he continued, though. "I, apparently, have severe PTSD and relapses because of it." Which was all true too. Maybe he was getting better at this whole 'wordplay' thing. As Vader, he'd had to get better than Knight Skywalker, but he still hadn't been good. Even then, he'd tended to be more of a blunt, brute-force kind of person instead of a subtle, precision-tool kind of person. It had only taken him three lifetimes to start getting over that, but he'd take it.

Right now, he'd take just about any positivity he could get.

The woman's eyes softened immensely. "Oh... I see." Then she shot an annoyed look at Master Yoda. "I would have liked to have known that before, though."

Yoda bowed in apology. The second (or was it third?) time tonight. That had to be some kind of record.

Ahsoka had thrown her arms back around her crechemaster's neck and was facing away from them again.

"May I?" Anakin asked, pointing to the child.

The woman seemed a little wary, but eventually nodded and stepped back so Anakin could come in. He walked around in back of her, looking up to the little girl's face.

"Hey, Snips."

She just hid her face away in the woman's neck.

"Yeah, I guess I can't blame you for being upset with me," he said with a sigh. "I know this isn't fair to you, Ahsoka. I thought I could handle it and keep it away, but... my mind-healers told me that I might be fighting the cold for the rest of my life. I wish you didn't have to live with this too... I hate it."

"Hate?" the crechemaster asked. It sounded like a rote reprimand, and Anakin could understand where she was coming from.

"Dislike it greatly?" he asked, a little sheepishly. The woman humphed, but didn't comment further, so Anakin went on. "But it's people like you that can bring me back, Ahsoka. So, I know you're mad at me, but I wanted to say thank you anyway."

She peeked up at him, pale blue eyes looking hurt. It killed him to see that look on her face… again.

"It was colder, this time," she said softly. "And... scarier."

So that was what made her angry. She'd always been one to look her fear in the face and challenge it to a lightsaber duel. But not this fear. This was something she had no control over whatsoever. Of course that would terrify her even more. It terrified him.

"It's okay to be scared, Snips," he said softly, reaching out a hand to lay on top of hers. She didn't pull away, so he kept on. "I know I don't like being scared, but it's something everyone feels – even Master Yoda."

Her eyes widened and she sat back, looking around at the Grandmaster, who nodded solemnly.

"That's what we're here to do," Anakin continued, "to train ourselves so that fear doesn't … rule us." He'd been about to say 'dictate our actions', but doubted Ahsoka could follow that at this age, even as smart as she was. "We shouldn't make our choices based on fear, but that doesn't mean we are never scared."

She turned back around, blinking at Anakin. Her eyes narrowed as she studied him. "It's going to get cold again, isn't it."

The former Sith looked down, but nodded. "Most likely, yes." And how it *galled* him to admit that. It made him feel so weak, no matter what his mind healers said. But somehow, he knew she needed to hear this,

and that was worth his discomfort.

The girl looked down at her crechemaster's shoulder. "I don't like the cold."

Anakin found himself smiling sadly. "Me neither."

"But... if you're here, I can help you stop it?"

His smile grew just a little. "There's a good chance, yes."

She sniffed, then looked up at her crechemaster. "Master Kobola, can Anakin stay here tonight?"

Anakin's eyes widened and he found himself simultaneously touched and panicked.

"Oh, no, it's—" he started at the same time Master Kobola said, "Oh, I don't think—" But Yoda cut them both off.

"A good idea, it is," he said, somehow making himself heard over both of them. Ahsoka seemed to light up, then squealed in excitement and squirmed to get down. The crechemaster let her go as both she and Anakin turned to stare at Yoda incredulously.

"I'll be right back with blankets!" the young torgruta yelled.

"Ahsoka! Inside voice!" Master Kobola practically hissed after her, but the girl was already gone. The red-head sighed, then turned to Yoda. "Are you sure this is a good idea."

Yoda studied both of them for several seconds, then nodded. "I am."

Finally, the crechemaster just sighed in resignation. "Very well," she said. "You can sleep on the couch over there. Or the large cushion like last time."

Anakin copied her sigh, then nodded and walked over to the couch, resigned. A couple of seconds later, Ahsoka came back out with her arms full of pillows and blankets. She was also followed by some very sleepy, familiar friends. Both of their eyes widened and grins broke across their faces as they rushed over to Anakin (who *still* didn't deserve this).

A couple of minutes later, he found himself curled up on the couch with younglings scattered around him. This was becoming a very bad habit, he thought.

As Master Kobola and Master Yoda continued to talk by the door, Siri came over, grabbed one of the blankets and spread it over all of them as they all snuggled up together.

"Not a word, Siri," Anakin muttered, hoping his burning face wasn't visible in the dim light.

"Whatever you say, oh Hero with No Fear," she said through a grin.

Anakin just groaned and he shot her a dirty look. She didn't look repentant in the slightest.

"Go away," he muttered. Despite his discomfort, he already felt sleep pull at him, and the younglings settling down around him actually seemed to help that along, strangely enough, even despite their squirming.

Siri smiled warmly at them for a moment before she laughed and did as he'd said.

A couple of minutes later, exhaustion – both physical and mental – claimed him.

Chapter End Notes

> One of my longest chapters yet. Thank you Carradee, Khalthar and Quathis for all their help with this!
>
> So, a couple of things:
>
> I've begun to use the word 'sapient' instead of 'sentient' because I looked it up, and any animal that has higher brain function is sentient, while those who are self aware are sapient. I thought it was the other way around. Mind. Blown.
>
> This will likely be the last mind-healing chapter for a while, but given the rest of the story, it had to happen. I wanted to name this chapter Fallout... but then I'd have to go back and rename other chapters and I really don't have the time right now. This new webcomic has SUCKED AWAY MY LIFE! I honestly get up, morning routine for an hour or so, eat, and then get to work drawing. I will draw with breaks (because burnout is a bad thing…) for the next 8 – 15 hours, then go back to sleep (an average of about 5.5 -6 hours), and I'm STILL behind. You guys are lucky you're getting this chapter this month at all. I reserve the right to wait to post the next one in July…

I also may not be able to respond to any reviews or responses until July, but I promise I read every single one of them! Some of them, multiple times. I really appreciate that you've taken time out of your own busy life to come and read my story. It really means the world to me, so thank you!

For anyone interested: If you go to webtoons, look up HACamp and then check out 'Hope for Scars', I'd REALLY appreciate it! The second installment should be up this week so I'd also appreciate it if you subscribed to it. Don't blame you if you just want to take a look at it though. Unlike my other webcomic that's a comedy with dry to morbid humor, Hope for Scars is about taking the first step past child abuse. So for those of you who like the Sight series, you may like that one. If you check it out, thanks in advance!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Quinlain Vos didn't see the Jedi Temple on Coruscant very often, these days. He was, after all, a field agent and, while that had its perks, it definitely had some major drawbacks too. He didn't get a lot of time off, but when he did, he was to report into the Jedi Temple for mind-healing sessions, as undercover missions tended to require.

(He didn't want to admit that Jedi in his position probably didn't get *enough* mind-healing sessions as he rather disliked going to them, but even he had to admit that they helped. Undercover Knights and even Masters tended to have to cope one way or another. Although, even with the mind-healing sessions, they tended to become… eccentric. He knew he was already getting a reputation. Most of it was the typical temple gossip making its rounds, but he didn't see much of a point in dissuading it. Reputations could be useful. And if he'd developed healthy – or even semi-healthy – coping mechanisms, well, he was a firm believer in not trying to fix what wasn't broken.)

He honestly had mixed feelings about the repercussions and requirements coming from his general field of work, just as he had mixed feelings about the Temple. Unlike other Jedi, he was allowed his own ship, mainly for his cover identities. (He actually had about three of them, and could get more, depending on what impression he wanted to make.) But, unlike other Jedi, he didn't have constant access to meditation areas or the Room of a Thousand Fountains, or training salls. He didn't deal with the constant presence of multiple other Force users in a confined area, even one as large as the Temple… for good and ill. Being back at the Temple felt like coming home – like a balm to his soul. It also felt restricting in many ways and it didn't take long for him to find himself itching to get back out into the field just to get away again. It could make him a little twitchy, which only added to his reputation.

Still, he tried to appreciate his time at the Temple. He really did. Often, while in the field, he longed to come back to the peace and safety that was the Jedi Temple, and he knew that in only a few short weeks, he'd be out tracking down one low-life or another, dodging blaster bolts while trying not to give himself away as a Jedi. It was a fine thread to walk. Sometimes he enjoyed walking it. Other times, it

just made him feel tired. He tried to focus on that latter emotion as it helped him feel the peace of the Temple and appreciate it more. He wasn't sure how well he was succeeding as he walked down the large halls of the building, ignoring looks he got from a good 70% of the people he passed. If he ran across someone he needed (or wanted) to speak to, he'd stop. Until then, they just didn't (couldn't) matter.

Eventually, he realized his coping mechanism to focus on how tiring his job could be wasn't working at the moment, so he switched to thinking of something else. He'd recently been to see his mind-healer, Healer Lako, and couldn't help but ponder on how different the session had seemed than normal. It wasn't anything *too* noticeable, but he'd seen a definite shift towards the more practical when it came to the healer's words of advice, perspective and coping suggestions. He wondered if that had to do with the outside healer they'd recently brought in for the slave-kid Obi-wan had rescued. He'd spoken to the knight briefly about the situation the last time he'd been at the temple over a year ago. He hadn't expected the Council to actually bring in an outside healer (or even admit that the Temple wasn't equipped for something), let alone to have that healer make such an impact on the other Mind-healers. If that were the case… but he'd bet his psychometry on it.

Honestly, he couldn't see the general development as a bad thing in the long run.

And while still constricting in many ways, the Temple felt different too. Freer somehow. He couldn't put his finger on it and had decided he needed to find a gossip source to begin piecing this puzzle together.

He also needed to spend time with his padawan, who was not allowed to go on most of his (admittedly rather dangerous) missions at this point, despite the length of time he tended to be away. Instead, she stayed and took classes from the normal teachers and had similar specialized training sessions that Quin had had at that age too. Maybe he could talk the Council around to letting him take Aayla with him this time, though. She was getting old enough and needed some in-field training.

He'd just begun to put his proposal to the Council together in his head when someone calling his name brought him out of his musings. He'd felt the presence, but hadn't really registered the signature as they weren't particularly close, but she had been in some of his specialized training classes and in their field, there wasn't really any avoiding knowing each other. Besides, her master was a Council member, so

she tended to have a little more interaction with him than others younger than him.

Turning to face the presence, he couldn't help but smile. She'd been a permanent resident of the Healer's wing the last time he'd seen her.

"Siri," he said, making sure he looked just a tad goofy, but didn't hide any of the relief he felt. Seeing her out and about like this definitely lifted his spirits.

She sent her own, undoubtedly just as calculated, smile to him as she approached. Still, he had no doubt she was happy to see him. Seeing any undercover field agent back in the Temple was always a relief.

"I see you managed to stay alive," she said with a wry grin and a raised eyebrow.

His own smile widened. "You're not lucky enough to get rid of me that easily."

She snorted. Then her face softened. "How've you been?" she asked.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Not much to say." AKA, not much he *could* say. Missions like his tended to be classified. He could be vague though. "Had a couple of nasty run-ins with nasty people on nasty planets. You know, the same old, same old."

Her snort this time was less a snort and more an amused grunt. "Well, it's still good to see you back here," she said, still grinning. Then her eyes flicked to the side, down a lesser used hall. So, she had a reason for approaching him. Huh. Had probably sought him out. Not that he minded. Tachi had a good head on her shoulders and tended to be good company. Although she seemed more… mellow, than she had the last time he remembered speaking to her. Not as abrasive.

Deciding to play along, he turned down the hall and she fell into step beside him. "I'm glad to see you out of the healer's wing," he said. "How long have you been out now?"

"Almost a year," she replied, an air of palpable relief around her. He didn't blame her. Little was worse than being stuck in the med-wing. "The Council has begun to send me on missions again. On my own, even. Nothing major," she sighed, her countinance gaining some definite melancholy, "but it's a step in the right direction."

He allowed a little wince to show. He knew how hard undercover

training could be, and her bout in the med-wing had more or less thrown a good chunk of it out the window. There was no way the Council would send her on mentally taxing undercover missions if she had relapses and episodes. He didn't look at her as he put a hand on her shoulder, although he could feel the gratefulness she sent towards him

"But," he said, side-eyeing her with a raised eyebrow, "I have a feeling you're about to ask me for something. Will this be an 'interesting' request, or one that will make me wish I'd just stayed away?"

She had the good grace to look sheepish. "Well, a little bit of both."

His other eyebrow joined the first as he looked over at her. "Both?"

Siri shrugged and scratched the side of her head. She was almost looking apologetic… he really wasn't sure what to think with that kind of emotion showing, but it wasn't good.

"I need a worm."

He frowned. "You're decent with software, programming and slicing." She had to be with their training. Although she hadn't been *gifted*, per se, she had to be competent.

She looked like she appreciated his comment, but still shook her head. "Not to the level I need. Your programs were works of art though. That's why I need you, Quin. Here are the specifications," she said, handing him a flimsy. "Burn that when you're done."

So the Council didn't know about this…? His mind brushed over her comment earlier on how they hadn't sent her on anything 'major'… With his gloved hand, he took the flimsy from her, not bothering to hide his wariness, then studied the list. His eyes widened again.

"For a personal *comm*?" he asked.

She nodded, biting her lip. And looking almost… mischievous. Was this for a prank? No… it couldn't be. This was far more malicious than that.

"Whose comm?" he asked, frowning. This might be getting into 'nope' territory here.

Siri regarded him for several seconds before finally deciding to tell him something. "Someone in the Senate."

His eyes almost bugged out of their sockets. Not many people could do that to him. Obi-wan, sometimes. Depa, rarely. Siri, though… he really should have known. So much for being more mellow.

"With something like this you could cause an inter-planetary incident," he said cautiously and preparing to stand his ground. He had every right to be suspicious with this.

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head, "nothing like that. I'm just planning on starting some… petty psychological warfare."

His frown flattened and he held up the flimsy, now folded so no one could see it. "This is not just petty."

"Okay, so it has larger ramifications than that, but I need this, Quin. Please." And there came what felt like the umpteenth surprise from her in as many minutes, because Siri didn't ask. Not with that tone in her voice. It was almost *begging*. Siri *never* begged.

He took a deep breath. "Do I want to know?" he asked.

The apologetic look came back. "It's not my secret to tell."

He felt his face go blank as he studied her. So she was doing this for someone else… in defense of someone else if he'd read her tone right. His life depended on his ability to read tones right. He looked down at the flimsy. That wouldn't be a small favor. This would take time and effort to write. He'd have to get… *creative*. Good thing he excelled at that. Too bad she knew it.

Just a couple more questions before he could decide. "Will this put the Temple in danger?"

"Not if you write it well enough."

So, something she didn't want to implicate the Temple in. That was… actually a load off of his mind.

"Will it put you in danger?"

She shook her head. "Not after the initial delivery. Even then, with enough planning, I should be fine." Hmm, not the best, but at least she'd been thinking about it.

"Will this put anyone else in danger?"

Her grin was practically savage. "Only the target."

He closed his eyes, feeling a headache beginning to build.

"And the target is?" He had to ask.

Somehow her expression just grew sharper. "What if I told you it was a Sith Lord?"

Aaaand that took the cake! Either this was a well played prank, or… well, he didn't really want to think about the ramifications. A Sith? In the Senate? *How*?! Who? Why was she planning on trying to put a worm on his comm link instead of, you know, *leading an army of Jedi* against him? Or her. In his experience women could be just as ruthless – more so, even – than men. Or them, perhaps? No, his mind was trying to distract itself. Focus.

He snorted and grinned at her. "Nice one, Tachi."

She smiled too, although she didn't look nearly so… Kriff! Was she *serious*?!

"I really do need that worm."

He dropped his smile as he looked down at the flimsy again, staring at it like it was poisonous as his mind raced through all of the scenarios he could think of. Somehow, he got the feeling he wasn't even close. That… was terrifying.

Welp, looked like he'd spend the next several hours meditating.

And preparing.

"I'm going to want to upgrade my weapons store, aren't I."

She didn't answer. She didn't need to. He hadn't said it as a question.

"And prepare some untraceable boltholes."

"Might come in handy."

"Kriff."

"Don't tell anyone."

He couldn't help but outright stare at her with that. "What?" he asked, as calmly as he could.

"I told you because I know you can keep a secret. Don't worry, Master

Yoda and Yaddle are in the know."

"Are they part of this?" he asked, pointing to the flimsy.

Sheepish came back.

Double kriff. And frip. And stang. And Sithspit… no, maybe that wasn't the best line of curses to go down at the moment.

"Siri…" he started, warning.

"I'll let them know," she assured him.

"Once you deliver it?" he asked dryly.

"Well…"

"Kriff it, Siri! You let me know that…" he paused when he noticed his voice getting a little loud and glanced around, "that the age-old ultimate enemy of the Jedi has somehow returned, right under our noses, and infiltrated the Senate and you want to play *games* with his comm unit?"

Then he went over that thought and felt the blood drain from his face. With the kind of security she wanted to bypass with her worm, and the specifications… this wasn't a low-level worker or servant they were going after.

"They're one of the senators."

Siri started to look a little nervous. "I've already said too much."

He felt sick. What kind of damage could a Sith as a senator do? And just *how* did Siri find out? Oh, this was why he didn't want to know! He shouldn't have asked! Stupid training. Stupid curiosity. Stupid survival instincts that urged him to push for more information! He'd probably be grateful he had tomorrow. Or next week. But right now…

"Please tell me we're preparing for the worst outcome," he finally said, pleading a little himself and rubbing the bridge of his nose. It wasn't helping.

Her smile almost hid the slight wince. Almost.

Nope. There weren't curse words bad enough to describe this.

"The Council doesn't know yet. They… won't believe us without hard

proof."

"Which is why you need the worm," he muttered. "And if you get a few psychological hits in on the side…"

She rubbed the back of her neck and looked away. "I thought you'd believe me more if I told you it was for the hits to begin with."

Well, with what she'd been through, he supposed she'd have to become more self aware, although he couldn't help but be a little impressed. She'd always been one of those who could be very good at deceiving themselves.

He sighed again and rubbed at his temples. "I don't know how Master Gallia survived having you for a Padawan. I couldn't."

She went from unsure to almost cocky in a second, far too fast for at least some of what she'd been showing him to not be faked. Ugh. He'd known she'd gotten good, but *this* good?

"I'll take that as a compliment," she said, every inch of her the old Siri he remembered. Somehow, that made him want to head to his room and hide under his bed for a while. Like he used to when he was little, just after he'd come to the Temple and the night-terrors and nightmares had been so bad he could barely sleep at all.

This *felt* like a nightmare. Surreal (Sith? Worms for Senate comms? *Really*?) and potentially dangerous all at the same time.

"Fine!" he finally said, "Fine, I'll get you one. And it will be the best fripping worm this galaxy has ever seen. Then I'm going to take my Padawan, whether the Council likes it or not, and high-tail it to the other end of the Galaxy. Maybe the Unknown regions, and I'm going to teach her how to *disappear!*"

She nodded sagely and chose not to say anything else. Which was good. He wasn't sure he could handle anything else at the moment.

Except he'd thought that too soon.

"Good. Then maybe she won't get shot down by her own troops," Siri practically whispered, with a thousand-mile stare that… Oh.

Oh.

Visions.

And she had to get proof.

That made sense… except, what the kriff did she mean, 'her own troops'?

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all… Was Siri in her right mind?

She blinked, and lucidity returned to her eyes as she smiled up at him. So fake it almost hurt to look at.

"Anyway, let me know when it's done. And I owe you one."

"Oh, you do," he agreed, maybe a touch hysterically. "You owe me big time."

Then, to his surprise, she leaned forward and hugged him. "It's good to see you again, Quin. Don't ever change, k?"

Why did that feel so… deep? Like she had so much more she wanted to say but didn't know how to say it? Not that he knew how to ask. Not in the mental state he was in at the moment. But the hug… helped. Normally he didn't like people touching him, but from Siri… maybe they were closer than he'd realized. Siblings through shared experiences and shared training and traumatizing events. She really had changed, even if she was still the same old, brash Siri she'd always been.

He didn't count many people as friends. But not many people accepted him as he was, or looked past his facade to see the real Jedi underneath. Not many people would let him in on a monumental secret like that simply because they trusted him. Then again, Siri had never been like 'many people'.

"Keep in touch while you're here," she said as she turned back the way they'd come. "I'd like to introduce you to Anakin."

Anakin.

"Wait, isn't that the name of the kid Obi-wan rescued?"

"Yup!" she said with a grin. "Thanks again!"

And then she was gone, walking away and down the hall with fast, purposeful strides.

And he hadn't even gotten anything from the actual gossip ring from

her.

Ugh. Somehow, he knew this evening would be very *long*.

xXx

Granta Omega looked over the plans on his holopad for the umpteenth time and scowled. He'd spent years – over a *decade,* even – setting things up and he *still* didn't have everything in place that he needed. Actually, with the losses he'd taken on Nar Shaada…

He shook his head, lamenting the fact that he hadn't pulled out of the slaving ring earlier. He didn't even *like* slaving rings, no matter how profitable they could be. But he'd needed the money… money he didn't have access to anymore. Which means he didn't have information about some of the planets he needed for this all to work… to set up for his long term endgame.

It would have been so *poetic* too. With just enough irony sprinkled in to make it delectable. Now, he may not have that option at all. Of course, the information may open up to him at some point in the future anyway, but it was far less certain.

So now he had two options: First, he could follow his original plan and wait a couple of years to enact everything, or he could settle for something potentially less poetic and simply act at the first available opportunity. It would be easier to avenge his father down the second path, if only for simplicity's sake.

And maybe that had been part of his father's problem. The drama, the poetic justice, the *satisfaction*

He wouldn't know.

Qui-gon Jinn and Obi-wan Kenobi had robbed him of his ability to get to know – or even make a good guess – about his father – about the man they killed. He didn't know everything about what had happened, but he knew enough.

Which was why they had to pay.

Well, the only one still alive did.

Yes, this might be a bit early, but waiting did not serve a purpose at this point.

And so he would act.

Chapter End Notes

AN: For those of you who want to know, I didn't make it in time for the contest. I got close... but close only counts in hoarseshoes and hand granades. :/ Still going to post the rest of it for those of you who are interested in it, but I can't until August. Sorry. :(

Next question: Would you guys be interested in a discord? It would mainly be about my fics so I could get discussions and feedback on them... but I'm SO BAD at discording... is that even a word? Anyway, there would also be places for people to go and just geek about this or that or the other, and boards on mental health discussions and each of my fics and web comics and such... Is anyone up for that? Discord? Anyone? No? Okay. ^^; *ahem*

Also, I'd like to give a shout-out to Mooku for the idea for this chapter! And also Carradee, Khalthar and Quathis, as always! You guys are my rock!

Thank you again to all my readers! :)

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next few days passed by both agonizingly slowly and all too quickly for Anakin. The day after Dooku had Fallen, he decided to initiate another 'hide-and-seek' session with his crechemates (he felt the need for more training in and above his lightsaber practice, and being around the other children *helped,* although he couldn't pinpoint exactly how or why) and had found himself impressed with everyone's improvement. Coira couldn't come as she had Padawan duties and classes, but everyone else seemed to have taken his previous sessions to heart and he found himself using more advanced methods to locate them. It helped to reassure him, knowing that these children were now more likely to survive if everything hit the fan again.

Not that he cared if the Jedi survived or not. Those specific teachings could still die out for all the pity he could give, but the actual people who made up the Order were another matter. If the Jedi teachings had to survive so those good people who lived them could survive... well, so be it. He'd deal with it, even if he couldn't make himself be *happy* about it.

Then he attended his session with Girth the day before he'd go back to the Senate. He knew the drall was worried about Anakin's state of mind and the session started off with careful, probing questions. How did Anakin feel? How had he been dealing with classes? How had he been dealing with his crechemates? Etc.

The further they went into the session, the more relieved Girth seemed, so Anakin took that as a good sign. Then they got into the meat of the session when Girth asked Anakin why he seemed to hate himself so much. Anakin felt any positivity fade as he looked at the mind-healer.

"I encompass so many things I hate," he said quietly. "So many things I *should* hate."

He could tell Girth wanted to say something at that, but he didn't, so Anakin continued.

"I betrayed my own people and murdered them – all of them down to

the innocent and those I loved the most. Then I took what stemmed from that and used it as a source of power to destroy even more people and more worlds. I am a criminal of the highest order who brought pain to more or less everyone I came in contact with. Is my hatred not justified?"

The drall shrugged. "Justification depends on the society you're in, much like 'shoulds' and 'shouldn'ts'." Anakin didn't miss the subtle admonition for talking about what he 'should' hate earlier. "In some societies, it's downright wrong to think of taking any life, from the smallest bug to the most intelligent person. In some cultures, it's perfectly fine to murder your parents or siblings for gain. For our intents and purposes, it doesn't really matter whether your hatred is justified; you still feel it, and thus it must be acknowledged and addressed.

"So, as a precursor, here's a question I want you to think about: Would knowing your self-hatred was justified help you to accept it and move on? Or is that justification an excuse to stay in a negative rut?" Girth's question sounded a little pointed, but Anakin could feel that it was also genuine.

He didn't answer. In all honesty, he didn't know if justification helped him move on or not. Owning up to one's mistakes was a good thing, wasn't it? But if that were the case, why did the knowledge just drag him down…? Was Girth right? Probably. He usually was. Didn't mean he wanted to voice it.

Eventually, the mind healer spoke again with a sigh. "Anakin, I think the problem here is that you feel you deserve this hatred."

Anakin's frown deepened. "I do."

"And you don't feel you can ever make up for it?"

"No." He honestly thought that would be painfully obvious.

"So you would hurt yourself and hold yourself back, thus affecting your friends, family, and other colleagues, simply as punishment? Torture yourself for no other reason?"

"Why shouldn't I be punished? It isn't torture. Isn't that how we learn?" And was it just him, or were they talking in circles?

The drall took a deep breath. "I think you're equating punishment with justice."

"How are they different?" He may or may not have actually meant for Girth to answer that question. To him it was another obvious fact.

The mind-healer shook his head again. "Punishment is supposed to be a function of justice: it exists to stop someone from doing something harmful – not always just the offender but anyone who knows of the situation. Correctly used, it is a less-painful intermediary tool so you don't have to suffer more painful, natural consequences to your actions. It is a learning device that protects inexperienced people while upholding a society's structure (their law), of which it cannot function without.

"For example, let's say you steal something from a candy store and don't get caught or punished. That can lead to escalation or retaliation. Let's choose escalation. So you got away with it, and later you steal from a hardware store, and then from a bank, and then from a crime syndicate... and then the item you steal from the crime syndicate ends up being an explosive that kills you. Or we can move over to retaliation as another outcome: the crime syndicate finds out who you are and comes after you and your family. The natural consequences for the larger thefts are much higher, more painful and longer reaching consequences than if you'd simply been caught and punished the first time to learn to not steal."

Anakin raised an eyebrow. "That seems rather simplistic to me."

"It's an example," Girth shrugged. "It's supposed to be simple to illustrate the concept. That being said, do you understand what I'm trying to explain?"

He thought about that for a moment before opening his mouth. "So... if I would have been punished the first time I killed out of anger... or even used the dark side at all... you're saying it would have stopped everything?"

The drall shook his head and re-situated himself. "No, not necessarily, although it might have helped if done properly. If you are punished just for the sake of punishment, it is honestly nothing more than torture, as I said before – which is the core of vengeance, not justice. Those two terms are equated far too often for our society to think of it healthily, but I digress.

"What I want to know is, how holding yourself back and intentionally hating yourself makes you – or even allows you to – learn and grow? Especially if you plan on maintaining that hatred for the rest of your

life," Girth said, raising one furry eyebrow pointedly.

Anakin frowned. "I hurt people. I deserve to be hurt because of it. Isn't that the natural consequence you were talking about because I *wasn't* punished?"

Girth shook his head. "Natural consequences rarely fit the crime. Going back to our example, does someone who stole something deserve to be blown up or watch their entire family die painfully? Does that fit the crime?"

Anakin couldn't hold back a wince. He was sure that Girth hadn't meant to go there, but it still brought up bad memories. He had killed people – entire cities even – for something stolen from the Empire. Often inane things that wouldn't hurt the Empire in the long run. Dealing out punishments that honestly didn't fit the crime had been a regular occurrence for him, the least of which had been Force-choking incompetent officers. Vader had been the Emperor's enforcer. He'd been there to make sure people didn't step out of line by showing extreme force... and maybe he was beginning to see *why* that was not the best way to go about ruling. If his punishments never fit the crime, how could people understand where the line between 'right' and 'wrong' was? Even if 'right' and 'wrong' were subjective to the society, the law couldn't be followed if it wasn't consistently enforced.

And Girth's message snapped into place. For the first time, he could see why hurting someone out of anger – out of vengeance, as Girth had said – wasn't justice, no matter how satisfying it felt. It ignored the laws – the consistency – and focused mainly on one person wanting to hurt another person simply because they were hurting.

It just perpetuated an ingrained cycle of pain.

Oh.

But, that still didn't mean he deserved forgiveness. Actually, it seemed like more of an argument against it.

"This is me paying for what I did. I stole so many lives, why should I not be paying for it for the rest of mine?"

Girth tipped his head to one side curiously. "Is holding yourself back honestly the best way to pay for their lives? And that doesn't even take into account your unique opportunity to prevent all of that. Does that count for nothing? Do the sins of one life condemn the next?"

"Are you saying I *shouldn't* hate what I've done?" The mind-healer was always the one going off about 'shoulds' and 'shouldn'ts'. Normally, Anakin didn't try to trap him in his own words, but he was frustrated that, for the first time in a while, Girth didn't seem to be *listening*. Or, maybe he just didn't understand and Anakin wanted him to. Needed him to, even. The fact that he'd just realized what Girth had been trying to say just seemed to drive that need home more.

The drall's brows furrowed slightly and his nose twitched in agitation. "Anakin, you can hate the act someone performs without hating the person who performs it."

What? That made no sense. Well, he'd *thought* he'd had a grasp on what Girth was trying to say. Perhaps not after all.

The mind-healer must have read his expression correctly because he clarified. "Let me ask you this: did your son do everything you wanted him to do?"

Anakin blinked. "No," he said shortly.

"But you loved him anyway?"

The former Sith remained silent as he tried to work through that, but eventually nodded his head because, again, shouldn't that be obvious?

"Why did you love him?" the drall asked.

"He's... family," Anakin replied slowly.

"So?" Girth replied nonchalantly. "I've known parents who despise their children, who only see them as slaves or servants and who abuse them for kicks. Do those parents deserve their children's love?"

Anakin shook his head, his puzzled and wary expression never leaving his face. At least he'd never *enjoyed* hurting his children, even when he hadn't known they were his, so he was glad he didn't fit into that category. It didn't stop the fact that he'd still hurt them. "I suppose not," he still answered.

"And yet, they were family."

"Then they were traitors." Even the most base sapient – heck, even Jabba to an extent – realized that. The hutt didn't *care*, per se, but he recognized the importance of family if his efforts to get his son back during the Clone Wars was anything to go by.

"Perhaps," Girth conceded with a nod. "But the point is, your son didn't always do what you wanted, but you could look past that to see the potential he had – the life he was born with. I'm betting you could see the goodness in him, and wanted to encourage it," Girth said with a soft smile.

"It was more like his power, initially," Anakin admitted softly, ashamed. "He was powerful, and I wanted that on my side... but then, I realized he was a link to... her. My wife." He took a deep breath in an attempt to help deal with the pain that always came from mentioning her.

"But from how you talk about him, I'm guessing you started loving him for who he is, and not the connections he had," Girth insisted.

The time-traveler thought about it, seeing where his mind healer was going now and frowning in puzzlement. "Yes. He was so bright and pure and determined... strong and hard-working... I love – loved him very much."

"Why?"

Anakin didn't know what Girth wanted to hear. It was Luke. Could someone *not* like Luke? Even the Emperor had wanted him.

After several long seconds of contemplation, he let out a sigh. Girth's initial advice, to return to their initial sessions of working on identifying his feelings when he found himself frustrated with something they were discussing or working on, came to mind. He thought he'd gotten better at doing that, but right now, he felt he was failing rather miserably. So he sat back and thought about how he felt about Luke. For the first time in a while, it didn't help. He still couldn't come up with a reason why he loved his son. He just did.

One can love the person without loving their acts. Very well, Girth had illustrated his position rather well, although...

"I'm… not entirely sure how to answer that. I loved my son simply because he was my son. On Tatooine, family is… highly regarded. If you do not treat your family well, you are – as I said before – traitors, truly not worth anything more than being a slavemaster." Well, it was more complicated than that, but still. "Also, I… don't think I can treat everyone like I treated my son." Especially not himself.

"Understandable," the drall conceded with a nod. "But my point is that you loved him no matter what he did. You didn't hate him because of

his actions."

True. And honestly, it didn't really make sense for him to feel anything but hatred towards Luke during a time in his life when he hated more or less anything – especially those things that reminded him of his time as a Jedi or anyone who defied him. Yet that spark of Anakin that had somehow remained alive had almost immediately latched onto Luke… and likely would have no matter what.

Girth was right. Luke's actions didn't affect Anakin's love for his son.

Could he learn to do that? Learn to love (or at least not *hate*) himself despite his reprehensible actions? No, he didn't think he could.

"I… I can't love myself like that," Anakin heard himself protest, still feeling as if the entire notion couldn't sink into his head. He just *couldn't*. He didn't deserve it. "Monsters don't deserve anything that pure. We don't deserve love, and shouldn't be loved."

Girth's mouth thinned into a line (not an easy feat for a rodent) and seemed to hold back a huff. Well, at least Anakin wasn't the only one who was finding this session difficult.

"Ignoring that we've discussed how you are *not* a monster before – if only because you're trying to turn your life around – I'd also like to remind you of our discussions on slave mentality vs. freeborn mentality. All sapients – sentients even – are born with certain absolute rights: the right to life, the right to choice and the right to use those to find your happiness. You don't *earn* your right to live. You also don't earn the right to love or be loved. That is simply a matter of biology."

Anakin blinked. Right, they had spoken of that. And he had tried to change his mind-set, but he still found himself slipping back into it. He wasn't sure if he ever would get out of it completely.

He did have one thing to say about that. "I… don't think love is that simple. Love… is more complicated than most people believe," he concluded. More complicated than simply deciding he could love himself and then doing it.

Wasn't it?

Girth's smile took on a sad tinge to it. He also seemed to be fine with moving onto a deeper discussion of this new topic, so he must have felt his initial point came across. He was probably right, but it would

take Anakin a little while to have it sink into his mind – the idea of learning to not hate himself despite what he'd done – learning to accept that he'd paid a price and always would and he didn't have to punish himself more…

It still felt wrong.

He set that to the side for later contemplation and focused on the new path of discussing 'love' in general and defining it.

"I have found," the drall said, "that 'simple' and 'easy' are two separate ideas. They can overlap, but sometimes the simplest things are also the most difficult.

"Love can be a difficult issue in practice, but I have found that it really is simple. It is merely chemicals in the body and neurons firing in the brain. Even when we begin to break it down into other definitions, it tends to be a simple concept. For instance, in my experience, I have observed two types of love: that which revolves around you and that which revolves around another person – or even people. No matter what kind of love one feels towards someone else – platonic, romantic, sibling to sibling, parent to child and visa versa – it can all be broken down into these two categories.

"In the type of love that revolves around you, it's all about how the other person involved helps you be better or make your life easier. In the type of love that revolves around others, it's all about lifting them up and encouraging them to be the best they can be. The relationships that tend to work the best seem to have a fairly equal amount of both types of love.

"To an extent this applies to yourself. And this might be where some find it complicated, but it isn't a terribly involved concept. You need to love yourself as much as you love others, because otherwise that lack of love – or even hatred – gets in the way of your ability to love, or in some cases, even function."

There was truth to that, even if Anakin didn't want to admit it. Hadn't he just been thinking about how hatred – how the dark side – had gotten in the way of his ability to love. And he should have known Girth would find a way to tie it into the point he was trying to make.

"But each type of love can turn into something else. Feelings and emotions constantly change and reshape themselves, growing or diminishing.

"That actually brings up something else I'd like to discuss, if you'll allow me."

Anakin was already feeling like he'd be doing a lot of contemplating later, but he still nodded. He might actually appreciate the different topic. Although, knowing Girth, it would still likely be something mind-boggling.

"You've spoken of your relationships before, and you've spoken of those you love. Now, appreciating someone for helping you become a better person is essential, but if it gets to a point where all you do is focus on how they make you feel or how the hole they leave behind will affect you once they're gone, there's something wrong."

Anakin hoped he didn't pale too much. He'd spoken of his wife before and knew that Girth had wanted to bring her up, but had avoided the subject up until now. It wasn't something he found easy to discuss in depth. He'd loved her so much (still did), but while he hoped he had been good for her, even he had to admit that his focus had almost always been about what she did for him and how she'd left a gaping hole in his life when she'd gone. Of course he'd wanted what was best for her, but now that he thought about it, especially towards the end, it had only been because he'd wanted what was best for himself. He knew she made him a better person, but the idea of losing her had driven him to killing children...

That couldn't have been healthy.

Had he ever had a healthy relationship with his wife? Is that what Girth meant when he said he'd wanted to discuss it?

"The first step to building this healthier love is getting to know someone. The more you know someone, the more you can understand their potential. Their potential happiness, their potential abilities, their potential accomplishments, and while only time will tell if you've judged correctly, you can hate what the worst people who have hurt you the most have done but still love them. It isn't always easy to separate someone from their actions and appreciate their potential instead, but it is worth it to try."

Anakin thought about those words for several seconds before looking back at his mind-healer.

"That sounds... sad."

Girth grinned. "Glad you're still using those words to describe

emotions. Well done, Anakin."

Was it too childish to admit he blushed at the praise? *When* would he grow out of this... again?

"Why do you say that sounds sad, though?" the mind-healer asked.

"Knowing what someone always could be and seeing them throw that away – because they always would," exhibit A: Anakin Skywalker, "seems... painful. Besides, I know I had potential – everyone told me for as long as I can remember – and I certainly didn't live up to it. You want me to somehow separate that from myself?" Even in his doubt, Anakin couldn't help but appreciate Girth's ability to bring a conversation back to full circle. Was this his round about way of helping Anakin figure out to apply the idea of loving a person without loving the bad they've done?

Girth smiled. "I'd like you to try. You, Anakin, are a person. A person's life – their very being – is an amazing occurrence. The human body is an extreme example of a statistical improbability – nigh unto impossible – and yet, here you are. And that isn't even taking your time-travel into account. The simple fact that trillions of similar life forms exist doesn't detract from how amazing you are or the potential you can reach simply by living. How you can change the world around you consciously and thoughtfully – for good or ill – is a mind-bending gift once you think about it. And that is just the tip of the gravity well when it comes to defining potential.

"Also, something to keep in mind: just because someone doesn't reach their potential initially doesn't mean they never can. That is one of the functions of forgiveness – of others and oneself: to remove blocks to one's potential. Recognizing one's faults is essential for growth, but clinging to them and letting them define you is taking that recognition to an extreme. It creates a block and doesn't allow you to grow. Often, by holding yourself back, you aren't giving the people you may have wronged (others *and* yourself) true justice. You are letting those terrible deeds influence your life far more than they deserve to.

"Realizing your potential is a great step. Realizing that you're sapient – human and you make mistakes – is a great step. Putting both ideas together is far harder, but you must understand that both are part of you to ever reach your potential."

"You're saying that my potential can still be realized... even now?" It felt like a foreign thought and he had a hard time believing it.

Girth nodded. "Yes, Anakin. That is why I want you to forgive yourself."

Anakin blinked. The mind-healer had just explained why he should… and yet… "I don't deserve forgiveness. This is the *least* I can do to make amends. Obi-Wan must have known that when he sent me back." That had always seemed right before. That familiar certainty was still there but suddenly seemed… dissonant somehow.

Girth blinked. "Obi-Wan... sent you back." Oh, right, they hadn't discussed that. To the mind-healer's credit, at least he rolled with that metaphorical punch as he shook his head and just moved on. "Could that be because he forgave you? As your son did?"

"My son was an incredible person, the likes of which only come into the universe once in a lifetime, if that." And he was so different from Anakin, far more like his mother.

"So you admire your son?"

The time-traveler blinked again. Girth seemed to take him back like that rather often. "Yes, of course."

"Wouldn't you want to be more like him, then?"

Anakin frowned. "If this is your way of telling me to forgive myself, then no." But he could feel himself questioning whether that was the correct stance to take. It had just felt right for so long…

But that didn't necessarily *make* it right.

Unaware of Anakin's thoughts, Girth deflated a little. Then he took a deep breath. "Anakin, forgiving yourself doesn't make anything you did right. It just means that you're letting it go – you stop letting it hold you back from being better. It's a promise that you will do your best to not do it again. This is the torture we were talking about. What good does it do the universe if you won't allow yourself to do your best?"

Because, according to Girth, justice for those he'd killed and tortured was becoming the best person he could be – and hopefully preventing it from happening again?

The former Sith felt his eyes widen and he stared at his companion for several seconds trying to wrap his head around the mind-healer's point and his own thoughts. He opened his mouth to answer, then closed it

again, feeling a bit like a gaping fish.

Then he looked down, staring at his hands now clenched in his lap. He still couldn't quite accept what Girth was trying to say… mainly for one very large reason: "I'd like to reach my potential, but I cannot forgive myself because I cannot trust myself," he whispered. He had blocks in place. He knew that. Had known it for decades. But they anchored him because he'd seen where he'd gone without them…

"What do you mean?" Girth asked.

Anakin finally glanced up, brow furrowed. "I fail to see how that could be misconstrued."

Girth simply raised one of his furry eyebrows in expectation and concern.

After a few moments, Anakin decided that his pride could take the hit of giving in. "The choices I have made throughout my life have been consistently wrong. How can I trust myself in the future when my record shows that I do not do well with difficult decisions?"

He expected Girth to respond with something like 'everyone has difficult decisions' or some sort of platitude that simply would not work on him at this point. After all, how could one argue with the cold, hard truth?

Instead, the drall raised a paw to his muzzle, tapping it thoughtfully. Finally, he seemed to settle on something. "You rely on other people. That's what a support system is all about."

Anakin just shook his head, remembering his mother dying in his arms. "Support systems are useless. They just leave you when you need them the most." When he'd needed Obi-Wan the most, he'd been sent off to Utapu because duty always came first. When he'd needed Padmé... well, she'd been there, but he hadn't seen it at the time, and honestly, putting that kind of pressure on one's pregnant wife still didn't seem like the best idea. He thought he'd had Palpatine, and what a monumental mistake that had been.

Was it really any wonder he had issues trusting people?

"What about Siri?" Girth asked. Anakin looked down. Could he trust Siri like that? Girth went on. "She's still human, so she probably can't always be there the exact moment you need her, but she has been there for you rather consistently lately."

True. But so had Obi-Wan during the Clone Wars.

Obi-Wan who had come for him so many times... On Mustafar, to kill him.

Or to stop him?

Or to just ask him *why*?

All of the above?

"And what about Ahsoka?"

Anakin drew himself back to the present and it took a minute to recognize what Girth had said. At that point, he couldn't help his dry expression. "She's five. And even in the future... she left."

Girth's eyebrows rose. "You knew her in the future?"

The former Sith Lord nodded. "She was my padawan."

The mind healer suddenly looked as if he'd realized several things. "I see. So she didn't come back, then?"

Well, she had, kind of, but it hadn't been the same, and then years later, after she realized he wasn't as dead as she'd initially thought she'd tried to come for him. It probably would have been better for everyone if he had been killed off. "Yes, but far too late."

More blinking from the rodent-like creature. "You know, I think it might be a good idea to sit down and just go over your timeline with you from beginning to end."

That almost brought a smile to Anakin's face. "That... might be prudent."

"In any case, you have to be as patient with your support system as you need them to be with you. Sometimes they will fail you, but that doesn't necessarily make them untrustworthy. If you have problems, you need to go to them, be as open as you can and then let them help you."

"But only people I can trust..."

Girth blinked this time. "Well, yes. That is the purpose of a support system."

"What if... someone you think you can trust... you can't?"

Silence.

Then, "Is that what Palpatine did to you?"

Anakin nodded, feeling tired all of a sudden. "He was a confidant. A mentor... a friend. I was so stupid."

"No... you were naive," Girth's voice was gentle. "And he was good at what he did. You know better now."

The former Sith snorted, ignoring the burning in his eyes, forcing it back. "It only took me an entire lifetime and billions of lives."

"At least you got there. Which is more than many people can say," the mind-healer replied. "But you did it. And that is why I don't think you deserve the torment you are putting yourself through."

More silence as Anakin looked up at Girth, who had a very warm smile on his furry face.

"I... don't know if I can ever believe that."

"I never expected you to just be able to let it all go overnight. It'll take time. And that's okay. But I truly believe you will get there."

And he did. The mind healer – for some strange reason Anakin couldn't fathom – actually believed those words. He had such faith that Anakin would heal and become a decently healthy person to be around. It just... didn't compute.

Despite that, he felt a stirring in his chest and found that... he wanted to believe that too. Then, for just the barest moment, he almost could – almost broke through the tiredness and anguish and fear that were his constant companions. Almost.

He was back to feeling raw and worn out again. Was it bad that he seemed to be getting rather used to the feeling?

Girth must have realized he wouldn't get any further with that line of thought because he changed the subject rather abruptly. Or maybe he just noticed the time.

"Now, before we leave today, I want to go over a strategy for your meeting with the Chancellor tomorrow."

All of the warmth inside Anakin fled and he swallowed, looking down.

"Strategy?" he asked, hoping his voice didn't let out his unease.

"Do you know how to outmaneuver a manipulator, Anakin?" Girth asked.

The time-traveler blinked then looked at his healer shrewdly. "You give them exactly what they expect." Qui-gon's words from his last real discussion with the ghost came back. "And you present 'weaknesses' that are not true weaknesses."

The drall nodded, looking impressed. "Exactly. The problem with presenting 'weaknesses', is that they have to be believable. So we need to find something for you that works believably. We need to present him with a slave from Tatooine."

"I... don't think I'll have too much of a problem with that," Anakin said, shifting uncomfortably. That wouldn't have happened as an adult, kark it!

Girth sighed sadly. "No, I suppose you won't."

Anakin felt his brow furrow. "In our last meeting, I passed myself off as a host from a higher scale store... Palpatine likely doesn't know that there *are* no higher scale stores on Tatooine, but it still isn't... implausible, even if he does find that out."

"You gave yourself a third owner?" Girth seemed to contemplate that. Then he nodded. "Yes, yes I think that will work very nicely. Your former 'slave master' could be a wanted criminal from the inner core worlds, someone who is more used to white-collar crime who was hiding out. He could have taught you to speak so well."

"And then he lost me and my mother betting on the races. That could work." He hadn't quite meant to, but simply adding one more master in there to cover an issue was a good solution that answered a lot of questions he'd find difficult otherwise. "And he could be the master Palpatine reminds me of."

Girth blinked. "What?"

Anakin shrugged, hoping he looked more nonchalant than he felt. This was still uncomfortable to discuss. "It was Master Yoda's idea. He suggested I tell the... Chancellor that he reminds me of a master I had."

The drall rubbed his chin as he nodded at that. "Just enough truth to be able to make things up on the spot, but still cover the holes in our stories. I like it."

The time-traveler did as well.

"If you let him know that you see most men his age in that light, he likely won't even take it personally. Or at least he won't feel singled out.

"As for weaknesses you present that aren't actual weaknesses... what are you comfortable with, Anakin?"

The boy frowned, thinking. "The person who told me to how to manipulate a manipulator suggested racing."

Girth thought about that for only a couple of seconds before shaking his head. "Unless you can come up with a particularly traumatic story, that's a little too mundane. I think the obvious choice is your 'masters' on Tatooine."

Anakin blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Well, you've said yourself that your previous master wasn't terrible and you don't seem to hold a lot of resentment towards him. The 'second' master will be based off of Palpatine himself, and so could easily be someone to draw emotion from while helping you ground yourself in the present as circumstances go simply by reminding you where you are and who you're speaking with. The 'third' master you obviously have terrible memories about, but it was so long ago."

"Isn't that a little... risky, presenting 'Palpatine' himself as a weakness?"

Girth nodded. "Potentially. That would be up to you, but you'll have to present believable emotions to fool Palpatine from what I understand. Besides, he will likely try to put himself apart from the people who have harmed you in the past. Since he will be trying to set himself apart from himself, for all intents and purposes, it could actually be rather... amusing if anything."

Alright, that did sound like it would be amusing. It would almost make going worth it.

"We'll have to come up with a name and a more detailed past for the 'second' master, but I think that's a good basis to work from."

As nervous as Anakin felt about going to meet Palpatine again, having this plan – one that looked like it actually might work – did lessen his tenseness.

"And if you need another 'weakness', why not present your mother as you would have last time. You're separated, alone, missing her, unable to talk to her, etc. We can discuss with Master Yoda about keeping the fact that she's free and that you still speak with her from the Chancellor. Do you... think you would be able to keep that front up?"

Anakin pondered that for several seconds before nodding. He still had issues regarding his mother, so he'd prefer to present the 'masters' as a weakness, but it was always good to have a backup plan, and most things involving her wouldn't be what could set him off.

(He pushed aside the memory of her dying in his arms and of the... slaughter that followed. He'd be staying far away from that line of thought.)

"Other than that, stick to your typical life, and you should be fine."

"What if he asks about the Order?"

Girth thought about that. "Tell him the truth. Just leave out your mind-healing sessions. And remember, last week you ate something that didn't agree with you. That could be a potential 'weakness' too, as he might present it as a fallacy of the temple not protecting their own, or something of the like."

"An unknown allergy?" Anakin asked.

"Not bad," the mind healer nodded, "although it would have to be a recent development for them to have missed it until now. I'll look up some nuts they use in the food here. We'll pick a rarer one and then remove it from your diet."

Which would reinforce the charade. He was feeling better and better about all of this... would wonders never cease?

"And your behavior once you start feeling overwhelmed in his presence will be...?"

Anakin let out a weak smile. "Squeezing the stress ball and a breath mint." The latter would remind him that he *could* taste now and that he was no longer in that suit – no longer was Vader, no matter how many times he Fell. He was no longer subservient to that man.

The mind-healer nodded, looking pleased. "And you remember the codes?"

"Yes," Anakin said. Then Girth had him go through all of the colors just to make sure.

"Good," the mind-healer nodded, looking pleased. Then took a deep breath. "I'm giving you one last out, Anakin. You don't need to do this." The drall looked at him with his beady eyes full of concern. It made the time-traveler's smile feel that much more real.

"I must insist on it, Healer."

Girth sighed. "Yes, I thought so. Very well. Is there anything else we need to go over?"

"Well, I haven't seen D40 in a while," Anakin said hesitantly. He'd been wondering about that.

"Right," the mind-healer said. "Because things have been a bit different these last couple of times. Would you like to see her today?"

Not really. "No. I don't think she's necessary any longer."

A long pause from the drall. Then, "Yes, I can see that. Very well, I'll discuss it with Master Xio and Master Yoda. Just realize that if you stop using the droid, it will alert the Council. They may see it as an improvement in your mental state and thus want to take you in for questioning. I'm not entirely sure how much longer Xio, Yoda and I can stall."

Oh. Right.

"They want to know about Sidious. And honestly, they have been extremely patient." True. As much as Anakin hated to admit it, even to himself.

"Maybe... We can let them know I've told Master Yoda?" Anakin suggested. That way he could present it, and Anakin wouldn't have to worry about it.

Did that make him a coward? Was he running away?

"Hmm," was all Girth said, not sounding to sure of that himself. Still, he decided not to push it, to Anakin's relief. Instead, he said, "Very well, I'll ask him to come to Master Xio's session next time. But as for

today, I can see that you're about done. Come up with a background for your new 'master' after dinner and send it to Master Xio and myself. As for right now, you can go ahead and leave."

"Thank you!" Anakin said as he hurriedly stood and then bowed. He was positive he could get all of his homework, the made-up background for his 'second' master and any chores he was assigned done tonight and head down to the racing circuit. Bleersh would likely be happy to see him. Anakin would be happy to be there.

"Good luck, Anakin," the mind-healer called after him.

"Thanks," Anakin said as he left, although he knew he didn't need luck, just the Force.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I will tell you this chapter FOUGHT me... I probably discarded a good deal of it at least three times, rewrote parts of it a couple dozen times and it ended up being a monster of a chapter. Not the longest one I've ever posted, but still.

Thank you to Carradee, Quathis and Khalthar for their help with this, as always! You deserve all the praise you get and more!

SO, I did get people saying they'd be interested in a Discord community... so here it is: discord.gg.ezzFnGJ aka Obi's Den of Geek and Writerings. I want it to be a nice, fun community where we can discuss ideas, geek about things, where I can get more immediate feedback about my stories, etc. SO, head on over if you'd like to join in. :)

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin walked down the halls of the Senate Building, easily navigating the semi-busy walkways (there must be a session today) and hoping he didn't look as stiff as he felt. They'd decided that it would be too suspicious if he was escorted this time, and so he'd come over to the building with the rest of his fellow Ambassador initiates.

It had been a nerve-wracking ride. They'd arrived on time and had all exchanged friendly nods and well wishes before breaking off to head to their respective assignments. Anakin hoped his smiles, nods and words hadn't looked too false.

Right now, he was focusing on putting one foot in front of the other and breathing. He was also going over the information that he'd made up about the "new" slave owner who had been on the run from a core world.

Sornta Rekiv (a combination of two officers he'd had under him... before he'd killed them, although he tried not to think of that). Anakin, as a slave, wouldn't know what planet he came from, simply that it was a core world as the guy had supposedly spoken of that a couple of times.

When he and his mother had first been 'won' by him, he'd seemed like a kindly old-man, perhaps new to Tatooine's culture. He'd liked to try and play Anakin against his mother by using what seemed like kind words at the time, but he'd taken great pleasure in emotionally torturing them. It had only been later, after he'd changed, that it had taken a turn to physical beatings. Then he'd lost both of them betting to Watto.

It was a simple story that left a lot of room for interpretation and embellishment, which meant that he could add in any details taken from his time under Palpatine that he needed to make the story more detailed.

He was deciding what exactly he should start with or how he should present the data he needed to get across when someone calling his name brought him up short. He blinked and turned, seeing a familiar,

smiling face come towards him.

"Senator Antilles," he said with a slight bow and a small, relieved smile as the man walked up to him, followed by another familiar face. Anakin tried not to stare at a very young Bail Organa, but it was not easy.

"I heard that you were sick last week," the Senator said with a bow of his own and a worried expression. Anakin wondered just where he'd heard that from. As far as he knew, the Senator didn't have a Jedi Ambassador this shuffling.

Still, Anakin simply waved it off, hoping he projected a casual air believably. "It wasn't anything very serious. It seems I have a mild allergy to some nuts that has developed recently. The healers simply wanted to keep me overnight to make sure it didn't get worse, but it was not remotely dangerous."

"That's good to hear. The Chancellor seemed rather worried about you."

Anakin tried to hang onto his calm smile, but he had to consciously relax his body. Well, that answered his previous question about where the Senator had gotten his information.

"That... is kind of him," he forced out. Fortunately, Antilles didn't know him well enough to see Anakin's unease. At least, if he did sense anything of it, he didn't say anything.

"Well," the older man said with his own smile as he gestured to Organa. "This is my son-in-law, Bail Organa. He will be taking over my duties as Viceroy when I retire at the end of the year. He is also to be our new Senator." He then turned towards the man he'd just introduced. "Bail, this is Jedi Initiate Anakin Skywalker."

Bail's smile was easy and warm as he reached out a hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Initiate Skywalker."

Anakin knew his daughter had been happy – or at least well loved – with the Organas as her adopted parents. It had been easy to see how devoted she'd been to their ideals and how much she'd enjoyed being around them when she'd been in the senate. That didn't stop Anakin from feeling uneasy. If anything, it made him feel worse simply because this man had been a good father when Anakin hadn't been. When Anakin couldn't have been, to be honest. It hurt.

Still, this man had done as fine a job as anyone could ask for, and he'd kept Leia safe for the first part of her life (before sending her into the rancor-den that was Imperial Politics – Anakin wasn't sure he could ever forgive him for that). Part of him still didn't want to acknowledge the man in front of him, but he forced that down, trying to focus on the positives.

"The same to you, Senator Organa. Or is it Viceroy?"

"When I'm here, Senator. When I'm back home on Alderaan, Viceroy, but I'll answer to either," he said with a raised eyebrow, looking a little incredulous. Maybe this had all come upon him quickly? He seemed a little overwhelmed. That didn't make sense with what Anakin knew about the Organas (and the Antilles), but he also couldn't say that figuring their dynamics out was a priority at this point.

"I'm sorry I missed your assignment to us," Organa said as he straightened, looking down at Anakin and yet he didn't seem condescending. He spoke to Anakin like he would another Senator.

Funny, the more he found out about the man who had raised his daughter, the more upstanding he seemed... and the more Anakin disliked him. Yeah, he'd definitely have to analyze this whole convoluted mess of emotion later. And somehow, he knew this was the *last* thing he needed before going up to speak with Sidious.

Palpatine. He had to think of him as Palpatine or he might slip up.

He brought himself back to the comment Organa had made and nodded, putting on a smile he hoped looked more real than it felt and tried to act like a child. "I as well," he said. "I did enjoy my time under Senator Antilles. I learned a lot." That sounded childish, right?

"You flatter me, Anakin," Antilles said with a grin of his own. "If you learned anything, it was only because you were attentive and hard-working. I know I've told you before that you'll go far as a Jedi – or anything you want to do, really."

Organa looked taken back, switching his gaze between his father-in-law and Anakin before it settled on the latter.

"Forgive me, but you don't want to be a Jedi?" He sounded rather confused. Anakin supposed he could understand that. The Jedi were an elite order of people with legendary powers. Why wouldn't someone want to be a part of it?

Involuntarily, Anakin found himself relaxing around the man. He appreciated his open nature and straight-forward attitude, if nothing else. Didn't mean he had to like it. "I came to the temple later in my life than my fellow initiates. Honestly, I was lucky to get in at all. I almost didn't. As such, I... don't agree with some of the creeds and doctrine of the Jedi." Or, well, all of it. Alright, that wasn't quite true, but Anakin knew he still had a lot of resentment towards the Order and their teachings.

"Such as?" Organa asked, looking genuinely interested. Anakin wasn't sure he wanted to get into that with this man in particular, especially not here in the open hallway. So he looked at his chrono.

"I don't believe it is something I have time to discuss," he said, gesturing to the timepiece. "If I am not on my way soon, I will be late to the Chancellor's office."

Organa and Antilles looked sympathetic. "Yes, of course," the former said with an understanding nod. "But if you find you have time in the future, I would love to hear your thoughts."

That frustrating dichotomy of feeling both grateful and resentful rose within him, reminding him of how he'd initially felt about Obi-Wan when returning to the past. He tried to focus on the positive again. After all, focus determined reality.

"I thank you, Senator Organa," Anakin said with another small bow.

"Well, we'll let you go," Antilles said. "But know you are welcome to come by our offices at any time."

That, Anakin felt far more sure about accepting as he bowed to Antilles too. "Thank you, Senator Antilles. Thank you for introducing me to your son-in-law."

"Our pleasure," Antilles returned the bow before turning to his companion. "Shall we, Bail?"

"Of course, Bail," Organa returned, looking amused. Anakin got the impression that their shared first name was some kind of inside joke. They turned and began to walk down the hallway again. Anakin watched them with a troubled expression for a couple of seconds before shaking the encounter from his head. He didn't have the time or mental capacity to focus on that. He'd need all of his faculties to go up against Palpatine.

So he took a deep breath and began to go over the information he'd have to 'let slip' to Palpatine again as he continued on his way towards the Chancellor's office.

xXx

"Ah, Anakin," Palpatine's friendly voice almost made the time-traveler cringe, turn and walk away. Almost. "Come in, come in, my boy."

Ignoring the sandstorm in his stomach, Anakin stepped as confidently as he could inside the Chancellor's large office. That was one thing he would not change as far as he was concerned. Showing any weakness in front of this man was like dumping blood into a gundark nest.

"Your secretary said you wanted to see me... sir?" he said with a raised chin, staring straight ahead.

"My boy, you don't have to be so formal with me."

Yeah, he wouldn't fall for that. "You're the Chancellor, sir."

"True, but I'm also just a man." Bantha poodoo.

Still, it might sell his charade better if he pretended to relax a little. He thought about how that might go and immediately shot the thought down. He knew Palpatine wouldn't show his colors this early, but he still had memories of the nasty games his former master would play and how painful those games would ultimately end up being.

And wasn't this just a long game to him?

"It wouldn't be... proper, sir." Ugh, he sounded like Obi-Wan. Or Cody. Or half the Emperor's sycophants. He repressed a shudder.

Palpatine frowned. "Well, I wouldn't want you to feel uncomfortable," he said, almost hesitantly. Then that smile was back. "In any case, have a seat. I'd like to get to know you a little more, Anakin."

The time-traveler's arms stayed behind his back as he walked forward and sat in the seat he'd taken before. Only then did he move them to rest comfortably on his lap.

"There. I'm terribly glad that you aren't still sick after having to miss last week." Why did he look so genuinely concerned? *How* did he look so genuinely concerned?

Anakin resisted standing up and bowing, instead just nodding his head

deeply. "My apologies, sir. It seems I've developed an allergy to some nuts."

"My. I hope it wasn't serious." The fact that he still looked so utterly sincere when he said that unnerved Anakin more than him cackling like the Emperor he remembered. He reached into his pocket for the stress ball, ignoring how Palpatine's eyes flicked towards the movement. Thankfully, the man didn't comment on that. Instead, he fixed his 'kindly' gaze back on the initiate.

"I thought the Temple screened for allergies when they brought their children in."

The time-traveler nodded shortly. "They do, sir."

"And yet they didn't catch this? Well, I suppose even Jedi are only sapient and even they cannot be perfect all the time."

So, Girth had been right. It was so small. Just the slightest throw-away comment that, given the context, shouldn't mean anything. It might actually seem *gracious* to anyone else. But Anakin had been around Sidious long enough to know what that comment was and how he actually meant it. He'd seen similar phrases used on Senators and other representatives as well as Palpatine's own court to subtly plant seeds and get what he wanted. This comment should mean nothing in the long run, but for Palpatine, it was his first foray into undermining the Jedi Order in Anakin's mind. He'd find a way to come back to it later, whether it be in that very conversation, or five years from now.

How did he keep it all straight?

The former apprentice grit his teeth and bypassed the stress ball for his container of mints. He palmed one as he spoke. "It's a recent development and likely wouldn't have come up in my yearly exam."

"Ah, yes, I see. Well, I'm glad it wasn't life-threatening. That could have been disastrous."

What did he want them to do? A full screening every month on the off chance that someone would develop a random allergy? The halls of healing were busy enough as it was. Well, they always seemed busy, what with saving people's lives and then watching them afterwards to make sure they didn't (escape) re-injure themselves. And studying. Anakin didn't even want to know how many extra classes it took to become a healer. He'd seen the first-year course load just after he'd become a padawan and had quickly vetoed the idea. He'd barely been

able to stand traditional classes as it was.

"Fortunately," Anakin said, "the crechemasters caught the symptoms early and got me the help I needed as quickly as possible. The Order's healers are very well trained."

Palpatine smiled indulgently. "I'm sure they are.

"So, why don't you tell me about yourself?"

Anakin took a moment to slip the mint into his mouth. He relaxed marginally when Palpatine didn't call him out on it and wondered how long that would last. The sensation of taste did a lot to keep him grounded and he felt himself unwind just a bit more. Not that he wasn't still on edge.

"What more would you like to know?" he asked. Hadn't they gone through the 'get to know you' routine last time?

"I learned a little of your history previously, but I don't know much about *you,* and I like to get to know the people who work under me in even the smallest capacity."

How was he so good at this?! Seriously? *HOW?!*

Anakin sucked hard on his mint and took a deep breath. "What exactly did you... have in mind?" he asked, unused to probing for clarification from this man.

"How about hobbies? What do you like to do for fun?"

The time-traveler blinked, wondering how he should answer that. Should this be one of the 'weaknesses' he put forward, or should he go with something more honest? He didn't like that idea at all... but Master Yoda had said that some honesty would be necessary. And he had a difficult time hiding things as it was, he knew, so keeping his untruths to a minimum seemed like a good idea, even if he did *not* want to give Palpatine any more cards to play. Just one, perhaps? Droids or racing? Hmm...

"I like to build things," he said slowly.

"Oh? What kinds of things?"

"Droids, ships, speeders... things like that." He hoped he looked excited. Palpatine's continual kind face seemed to get on his nerves far

more than his 'enjoying sadistic activities' face. He hated how whenever the Emperor had used this kinder face (disfigured as it had been), he'd always followed up with something truly nasty to whoever he'd been speaking to. Anakin still found himself bracing for pain, even though he knew it wouldn't (shouldn't...) be coming.

"Mechanics, then? Well, that sounds delightful. Have you built anything recently?"

Well, his arm extensions and stilts... not much else though. "Um, no, sir."

The undercover Sith showed a concerned frown, which only made Anakin tense more. He forced himself to relax *again*. It only partially worked.

"Whyever not? Do you not have the parts? I'm sure I could get some scraps from the Senate's old droids if you'd like to take them."

And the bribes started. He really did have the same MO. He just delivered his poison with a friendly grin and tried to seem more generous than he should be. As the Emperor, he'd simply put on a farce that fooled precisely no one even as it displayed his power over people – but it had been the same in all too many ways.

"Oh, it isn't the parts, sir, I simply don't have time with my studies."

Palpatine blinked. "Your studies? And you have no free time? I didn't realize the Jedi worked their younglings so hard."

Anakin heard the *too hard* underneath that sentence. Another seed Palpatine wanted to plant. He swallowed and forced himself not to grit his teeth.

"Well, I am from the outer rim, and with my circumstances, I didn't... get the best education." It was difficult to dumb himself down to a childish level, even now (and *especially* in front of this man). He was pretty sure he didn't come off as an 'outer rim slave' with his way of speaking, even after two years of trying to use more simplistic words and sentence structures. "Besides, I came into the temple at least four years later than my nearest agemate. If I am to continue to catch up, I have to work hard."

"That doesn't mean you should have no time to yourself."

He was about to protest again, but something that sounded much like

Qui-gon's voice drifted across his mind. *'Present it as a weakness*.' This really wasn't something that bothered him. He was using his extra time just as he wanted to, and while he still didn't feel he had enough, he also knew that that was no fault of the Jedi.

This was something he was strong against that he could present as a weakness.

So he tried to remember how his younger self would have reacted to that. "I... guess you have a point," he conceded, trying to sound frustrated. It wasn't difficult.

"It's settled, then. I'll get those droid parts for you."

Anakin felt his stomach drop. He wanted *nothing* from Sidious. "As a Jedi, sir, I'm not allowed to accept large gifts."

"This isn't a large gift, I assure you."

Kriff! How was he supposed to handle this?!

"I'm afraid that the Jedi Council might see it that way," he almost blurted out hurriedly.

And there came the man's stubborn, dis-believing face. He hadn't seen that one in a while...

"Surely a couple of small broken droids – or even just one – wouldn't be worth notice?"

Blast! He should have gone with the racing after all. Saying 'no' to this man went *beyond* uncomfortable and into panic-inducing territory. His hand found his stress ball and he focused for a moment on breathing and releasing everything he could to the Force.

"Anakin?" He was failing! He should have listened to Girth. *Again*.

"Anakin?"

If he didn't answer soon... He could imagine the pain and the torture. He clamped down on his emotions as hard as he could.

"Anakin?!"

He managed to look up at the Sith-in-disguise. Yet again, he looked genuinely worried. Ha.

"Whatever is the matter, my boy?"

And there it all went. All his hard work, up in smoke. Because...

Wait...

No...

No, he could save this.

This was his chance.

"I'm... sorry, sir," he managed to force out. "One of my... former masters would try to give me things. Then he'd just... take them away, or it would be something utterly useless... It was one of the nicer forms of... abuse he used." Which was true enough, if difficult to say. Anakin wished he knew better regarding where the line of giving too much truth away was. And why did he feel he needed to relearn it with every 'master'... even his former one the second time around?

As frustrating as this whole charade was, he had to admit that he did rather enjoy seeing his former master backpedal.

"Oh, he sounds truly dreadful."

The irony. Anakin almost had to force a smile down. Almost. Girth had been very right about how amusing just seeing his former master try and distance himself from, well, himself, was.

"He... was."

"Is that why you were so nervous about me? Because of him? Do I... remind you of him?"

That was a dangerous question, and Anakin would have to answer it just right. So he took a deep breath and drew up his cover story.

"He was the first core-worlder I met. I don't know where he was from, but he wasn't used to life on Tatooine – although he adapted quickly enough." And there may have been a bit too much bitterness in that for his liking. Palpatine had always been far too good at adapting.

He took another breath, this one softer, calmer, more subtle as he repeated the first line of the Jedi code in his mind. *There is no emotion, there is peace.*

Yeah, that wasn't helping him right now.

Of course, it never really had, had it?

Stupid Jedi teachings.

He pushed all those thoughts aside and hurried on.

"I don't think he came looking for me... or mom. Not initially. He just wanted a servant and he won us, gambling. At first he seemed much nicer than any master I'd ever heard of. He even tried to be my friend. He taught me how to read and write basic, and speak it better than anyone else, but then..." Anakin couldn't stop a shudder.

He took a deep breath. Yeah, that was enough of that.

So he looked up at the Sith Master, who watched him with a blank face. "It isn't just you." Lies. But a necessary one. "I... feel this way about older masters at the temple too."

Palpatine frowned, looking genuinely puzzled. "Why would the Jedi assign you to me if you had such traumas?"

That could be actual confusion, or he could be trying to sew discord regarding the Jedi Order again. Or he could be suspicious. Or all of the above. The man didn't realize he was preaching to the choir, apparently.

"I'd... gotten better. I'm trying to get over it because it's an irrational fear." Which was both true and untrue. Not every man in the universe was Sidious. Thank the Force. Fear of Sidious seemed more along the line of common sense, though.

"That doesn't seem irrational to me at all." Anakin blinked, a little taken back at Palpatine's words. Then he balled his fists. Another staple of this man's mode of operation; telling people exactly what they want to hear before twisting it somehow. "I'm surprised your Jedi Masters would think it irrational. You had some difficult trials in the past. That's not something that simply heals overnight."

He would know, with how much trauma he induced in others. And Anakin never said it was the Jedi who had given him that idea, but Palpatine had assumed it – almost to the point of pushing the subject with how much righteous anger he'd delivered the words... In all honesty, Anakin didn't see a point of dissuading him of the notion.

He knew Palpatine would try and drive a wedge between the new initiate and the other Jedi as he had the first time... a wedge that was,

in all honesty, already there. He'd likely try to disabuse the little initiate of the fallacies of the Jedi Order, not realizing that Anakin already knew – intimately – of their weaknesses. That could be a perceived weakness of his that wasn't really there, but he'd have to play it up a little.

What would he have said the first time?

"Really?" he finally asked. His younger self would have looked for validation and reassurance, so that's what he brought to the forefront.

The Chancellor looked indignant. "Of course! There is a reason why you feel that way and it's completely valid – to be expected even. I just hope that I can prove to you that I am nothing like this uncouth pretender from your past."

The irony was so strong, Anakin had to keep back a snort of amusement. Palpatine must have seen it and interpreted it as an agreement or tentative hope, because he smiled warmly.

"Why don't you stop by one of the cafes on the lower levels and pick up a treat on your rounds today?" he said as he slid a datapad over the desk. "If being here is really that uncomfortable, I won't hold you long." Anakin went to protest, but Palpatine held up a hand. "Don't consider this a gift, but a reward. In this instance, you will have earned it."

Trying not to seem too relieved (to just get out of there, kriff the 'treat'), Anakin reached over and took the data pad with its list of errands and read through them.

"When do you need this done by?" he asked crisply, then internally winced. Old habits die hard. He'd fallen back into the 'enforcer' roll so easily, and it felt so natural. Of course it would, that's what Palpatine wanted.

"Oh, take your time, my boy." He almost couldn't hide the cringe at the prospective Emperor's term of endearment that time. 'Take your time' from the Emperor meant that there wasn't a way for Vader to avoid punishment – only prolong the time before said punishment would come.

Anakin nodded and stood, then bowed before turning to leave. He forced himself to walk slowly but determinedly, stiffening when Palpatine called his name.

"Before you go, is there anything you'd like to ask me?"

The former slave took a moment to brace himself before he turned back around. "Sir?" he asked.

"Well, I'd like to hope we can be friends, hence why I asked after you. Is there anything you'd like to ask me?"

Anakin blinked and tried not to tense. No, there wasn't anything he'd like to ask this son of a bantha, but...

Reluctantly, he thought back on their conversation and opened his mouth.

"What do you like to do... for fun, sir?" He had to at least put up a token effort. That isn't outside of Palpatine's expectations, he was sure.

The smile the politician sent Anakin was almost radiant. (And one day, Anakin would figure out how he faked the expression so kriffing well.) "Well, this job is rather time consuming, as I'm sure an intelligent boy like you can imagine. I don't get many days off, but I do rather enjoy going to the operas and ballets featured from different cultures around the universe."

Anakin had known that. It had been something the man had enjoyed even in the future, if not as much as playing his blasted political and mind games. As he'd grown older, he'd left his palace to watch entertainment less and less.

"Perhaps, when I go one of these days, you could accompany me?"

After the fall of the Jedi, Vader had rarely accompanied his master to such things and didn't have time for them himself. General Anakin Skywalker and Padawan Skywalker had gone a couple of times. He hadn't much cared for such performances before (not his cup of tea, as Obi-wan would say) and he'd only gone to please the Chancellor. It would be utter torture now.

"I don't know if that would be... appropriate," he said slowly

"Well, just keep the offer in mind. If you have any more questions – about me or the errands," he nodded down to the data pad in Anakin's hand, "don't hesitate to ask. I may not be able to answer every personal inquiry, but I want you to know that you will never get in trouble here for asking questions."

More lies.

Anakin pitched his head forward into a shallow bow again (oh, how bowing to this man galled him!) before speaking quietly.

"Thank you, Chancellor."

"You're welcome, my boy."

Then the time-traveler turned and strode out, already planning on what he would need to do to accomplish his tasks.

If he focused on that, maybe he wouldn't focus on his elation at having successfully navigated his second solo meeting with his former master. It wouldn't do to tip the man off, after all.

xXx

Palpatine stared at the door where the boy had disappeared for several seconds. There was something off about Anakin Skywalker. At first, he'd chocked his feeling up to the boy's obvious aversion to him. At least that had been answered for now. The child's story was indeed plausible.

But there was something niggling at the back of his mind that told him there was more to the initiate than what even he could see, and Palpatine had not gotten where he was by ignoring such intuition.

He'd have to think on the entertaining conundrum that was Anakin Skywalker some more when he had more time...

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thanks again to Carradee, Khalthar and Quathis for your help in this. I cannot thank you guys enough.

SO! Awesome news! Quathis, as practice to become an audio-book reader, will be putting up a podfic of Hindsight is not Perfect! He's in the final stages right now, actually. I'm so excited! (PS. A podfic is more or less fanfiction being read and/or acted out like a radio drama - this will be him simply reading it.) I will be putting links on my discord!

PLUS this story will be translated into RUSSIAN of all things! I'm so honored, I can't even...

Also, as a professional artist, I'd like to start streaming me

drawing pictures from my fanfics. If you'd like to suggest or vote on which scenes you'd like to see me draw, again, check out my discord! I'm still discord illiterate, but I'm getting better, so hopefully it will be all up and running soon. (And thank you to Imperiosimp for your help on the discord as well! Wouldn't happen without you!)

Discord: https://discord.gg/zJQSDa8

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So," Master Xio said carefully as they started his session the next day, "how did it go, yesterday?"

They sat in the normal room, him on the edge of the armchair across from hers. Anakin looked at her with the barest smile. "Very well, actually."

She looked only marginally relieved at that. "Any nightmares?"

He shook his head. "None that I remember."

She cocked her head to one side. "No other side effects that you know of?"

He frowned. "Are you… looking for something in particular?" He wasn't quite sure what 'side effects' would be worth noticing. He actually felt rather… normal, considering. He wasn't at his best, yet, but he didn't feel particularly badly either. Was she looking for something specific?

The white-haired master sighed. "I've been speaking with Healer Girth and we came to a realization that his definition of 'normal' and mine are… different."

Anakin cocked his head. "How so?"

Her lips thinned a little, more in resignation than anger. "A Jedi lifestyle is, in and of itself, stressful. As such, we, as a whole, tend to be used to higher states of stress – and the after effects – than what most would consider 'healthy'."

Huh. That certainly made sense. If someone lived in a certain condition, then it did tend to become usual and they either adapted to it or broke. He cut off that train of thought before it could go down a very dark black hole.

Master Xio sighed again, slumping a little. "I've noticed some symptoms of what he's pointed out in multiple Jedi I've treated over the years, ranging from mild to extreme cases. Those mild cases I

tended to pass off as normal. It isn't that I didn't understand or know about it, per se, but that I just didn't make some mental connections that I, as a therapist, really should have." Ah, that would explain the guilt he could sense from her.

"It isn't your fault," he said slowly, unused to being the one giving her advice. "You didn't know."

"Hmm," she replied, gaze distant. "Perhaps. But apparently some of my fellow Jedi mind-healers *did* know of these symptoms and the effects, so it was there to find. I made a note to stress it in the teachings and classes mind-healers have to take for future reference. After that, it's just a matter of time to work through it and forgive myself for not looking deeper."

Well, that was something he could definitely relate to. It was nice to see her taking her own advice. But that also made him curious. "What symptoms – or repercussions – are you looking for?"

She took just a couple of seconds longer to shake her thoughts away and straighten up, matching gazes with her patient. "First, let me tell you a bit more about stress for context*. Stress is your body's reaction to harmful, potentially harmful or perceived harmful situations. The most common reaction in relation to stress is to release hormones to temporarily help your body deal with said situations.

"The most common of these hormones is adrenaline. Adrenaline can be helpful and beneficial to the body, but it is meant for temporary usage. Using it – or having it in the bloodstream – for extended time periods has effects on the body, many of which are harmful." She paused and glanced up at him to make sure he'd followed her so far. At least that was the impression he got, so he nodded. She returned the gesture and looked down at her data pad again.

"Now, prolonged stress has its own serious problems not always caused by adrenaline, although there is a lot of overlap, but I'm going to focus mostly on the effects of adrenaline, just to illustrate my point. Here are some common symptoms of continued adrenaline spikes: they can damage your blood vessels, increase your blood pressure, and elevate your risk of heart attacks or stroke. They can also cause headaches, soreness in the chest or abdomen and weight gain. They can also result in anxiety and insomnia. Again, a lot of these are symptoms of more general stress as well, but are most often seen with prolonged adrenaline spikes.

"I bring this up, Anakin, because you've gone through several very stressful situations recently: seeing your previous abuser, everything that happened with Dooku and the fact that I know you still put yourself in reckless or dangerous situations a couple of times a week – you've admitted as much to me before. This can be especially damaging to children both physically and psychologically, so with that in mind, are you suffering from any of those symptoms? Pain in your muscles, chest or abdomen? Insomnia? Headaches? Weight gain, even?"

Truthfully, Anakin had been thoroughly exhausted the day before – the kind of exhaustion he liked to work himself into because it led to dreamless sleeps. He had also been fighting a headache for the last week, ever since… well, Dooku and that whole fiasco, so maybe she was right to worry?

"Um, no weight gain," he said, "and I slept well last night, but I haven't been sleeping very well otherwise," he admitted. "I've also had a mild headache off and on for the last week or so." He wouldn't bring up the specific event if he didn't have to. She knew what he was talking about.

She sighed and nodded. "I was afraid of that. I'd like to have a healer look over you before you go today, if you don't mind. Just to run a couple of tests and maybe give you something for that headache or sleeping."

Anakin would like to say his face didn't fall… but it did. He hoped he didn't look too stubborn. He hated the healer's wing, especially when staying there.

"Meanwhile, I have some exercises that can help you activate your parasympathetic nervous system, aka the 'rest-and-digest' system – which counters the 'fight-or-flight' system."

He frowned a little, having never heard of a 'rest and digest' system before.

She went on. "First is meditation. I think this might be one reason why meditation is so strongly encouraged in our order, because it helps to promote equilibrium in the body and allows for your body to rest and repair itself."

That might explain a couple of things about his first life, when he'd hated meditating. Although, come to think of it, he'd been kind of neglecting meditation exercises lately, so perhaps he'd have to look at

fixing that. It was certainly better than ending up in the healer's wing because of something like this… which, he realized now, had happened multiple times, especially during the Clone Wars.

"Other exercises," Master Xio continued, "to try that promote equilibrium: Deep breathing exercises; slower kata forms, especially those without lightsabers or that focus on deep breathing, stretching in combination with the movements; speaking to friends or family about stressful situations so you don't dwell on them as much; keeping a diary of your feelings or thoughts; eating a balanced, healthy diet; exercising regularly; limiting stimulant and alcohol consumption; avoiding bright lights, computers, loud music and holo-projections before bed."

"I… have been slacking on meditation recently," Anakin admitted. He hadn't realized why it was so important, but he had a strong suspicion that most Jedi didn't.

"But you have been speaking about stressful situations and exercising regularly, so I'm sure that has helped," his mind-healer pointed out.

Anakin nodded. That was true...

Master Xio studied him for several more seconds before putting the holopad down on her knees and folding her hands.

"I also bring this up, Anakin," she said, "because despite you telling me that yesterday went well, and despite having talked it over with your therapist, you're still on edge. Can you tell me why?"

Anakin blinked. "Am I not shielding?" he asked.

The mind-healer shook her head with a sad smile. "No, you are. You just confirmed my suspicions though."

She always had been too good at guessing.

It was Anakin's turn to sigh, although he kept it internal, but felt some amusement lacing his thoughts. He really should have known better. Then he sobered as he confessed. "I'm frustrated that I can't figure it out. I'm on edge, but… I can't tell you why."

Master Xio frowned. "Was it something he said?"

The time-traveler shook his head. "No."

"Something you said or did?"

Again, he shook his head.

She thought about it for several seconds. "Was there something out of the ordinary?"

He thought back over his talk with the man. No, nothing had really gone out of the ordinary. It had gone completely as expected…

Wait…

"It… went too well," he realized.

"What do you mean?" the mind-healer ventured cautiously.

The time-traveler looked out the window at the Senate building in the distance feeling a little dazed. "I missed something. Nothing ever goes that well around me – especially not when it comes to *him*. But I cannot figure out what I overlooked." Besides the obvious movements for mints and stress balls that Anakin hadn't tried to hide… and what had he gotten out of those? Did he just pass that off with Anakin's story of being wary around him due to his past? He hoped so, but knew better than to accept that as truth.

The Jedi Master puzzled through that for a couple of seconds before responding. "Would you know if you'd given something away? Would he have let you know?"

The daze began to clear and Anakin stiffened. "No," he said, starting to feel a little sick. Well, there was the nausea she'd been talking about earlier. "Although, if it had been something big enough, he would have made a move..." but the smaller slip-ups were worse, in a way, because they built up over time and...

Oh, Force... what had Anakin let slip already? Just by walking into that Force forsaken room? He hadn't wanted to think about it, but the thought came crashing into consciousness without care for what it destroyed on the way.

"Anakin," Xio said worriedly. He blinked and took several deep breaths, releasing his worry to the Force. Then he nodded at her, letting her know he was fine. He'd known what would happen and what he would walk into. They just had to make contingency plans. Right. Yes. Contingency.

"I... do not know what I may have let slip," he heard himself say, and then braced himself against the flailing typhoon in his stomach. He swallowed, then steeled himself as best he could, allowing a stony expression to fall over his face. "We should plan for the worst." And the best. And everything in between.

The white-haired master looked unsure. "What would you classify as 'the worst'?"

Anakin opened his mouth, then closed it again. There were a lot of worst case scenarios now that he thought about it.

"That he finds out I'm from the future," he finally said. "That he finds out, somehow, that I used to be Vader. He doesn't know my weakness, yet, but he will not confront me until he has something to hold over me."

Xio frowned. "Could he find any of that out? Truthfully?"

With Dooku potentially on his side? "It's... possible," Anakin said. "Unlikely, but possible." He could try and remember what he'd let slip to Dooku, but while he'd gotten to where he could be more detailed as Vader, even then he had never been good at keeping track of things like that. He'd always relied more on the Force and strong-arming his way through more or less every obstacle in his path. He'd just have to assume he'd let some crucial piece of information slip somewhere and that Sidious would figure it out sooner or later.

"What will he do if he finds out?" She'd taken out her notepad again and was typing away, apparently going – at least partially – into her 'analytical mode'.

"That depends on what conclusion he draws," Anakin said slowly, "and how he comes to said conclusion. If he finds out I'm from the future, he will want to ascertain how far into the future I am from. If he realizes that I've told the Jedi who he is, he could very well attack the Temple."

That made Xio stop for a moment, brow furrowing. "How? He doesn't have the clone army you spoke of. Does he have access to droid armies already?"

Assessing like this tended to calm Anakin down, give him the focus he needed, and he welcomed that now. "Unlikely. However, he does not need to attack physically to destroy the Jedi."

The older woman paused again, eyes widening. "You're talking about a campaign? That could be political suicide."

Anakin shook his head. "I don't think you understand exactly how good that man is with words. He could likely have something drawn up within hours that would set the Temple's standing back for years, if not decades. I wouldn't be surprised if a campaign of his could drive the Jedi from Coruscant." Her eyes got bigger, but she didn't question him again, so she must have sensed the truth of his words. He felt her release some of her own fear to the Force and then dive right back into analytical mode.

"Why hasn't he already used this tactic?" she asked.

He almost snorted. "Because it would be a heavy blow against the Jedi, but it wouldn't wipe them out. The Order would be around to rebuild itself eventually, stronger than before. Not only would that grate against his Sith sensibilities, but it would allow many potential, future threats to his Empire to remain. By playing the long game, he slowly diminishes the Jedi numbers – mostly in the war, but I wouldn't be surprised if he had a hand in some of the deaths before the Clone Wars as well. He is, after all, Chancellor and has some sway over what missions the Jedi receive and who is sent on them."

Despite her otherwise emotionless face, he saw her swallow. No doubt if she didn't have such a healthy skin-color, he'd be able to see green.

"Then he starts the clone wars and wipes out as many Jedi as possible," she concluded. "In one, fell swoop."

Anakin's lips tightened, and he debated telling her his own conclusions. Ultimately, he decided that she needed to understand the gravity of the situation and the thorough nature of his old master's plans.

"In the future I come from, less than one percent of the Jedi survived the year following order 66. The numbers continued to decrease from there. I know of maybe a dozen Jedi who survived a decade. Kenobi, Vos, Jareth, Tano, Olin, Master Yoda..." He closed his mouth and breathed out his pain and guilt and *hatehatehate* of himself (with only partial success) into the Force before speaking again. "To my knowledge, only Master Yoda lived past two decades." And he'd only known that because he'd felt the old master die.

He couldn't look up and meet her eyes, so he gazed off to one side of her, knowing she stared at him in disbelief.

"No one else?" she asked softly.

"To my knowledge, no."

"There were… no Jedi at all?" she said it as if she were in shock, which she likely was.

Anakin paused. "Jareth took on a padawan, as did Obi-wan, albeit shortly." Because Luke had been far too untrained to have studied under him for long by the time Anakin had... killed him.

Would he ever get over that guilt? Or the guilt about the fact that he *hadn't* felt any guilt at the time?

"If the Jedi lived on," he forced himself to keep going, "they lived on through those two alone. Ezra Bridger and... my son."

He wondered if she'd address the elephant in the room of who had killed all those Jedi. He wasn't sure he could deal with that at the moment. Not with Palpatine and everything else going on. Besides, wasn't it obvious? Or was it just him?

"I... see," she finally said. Then, to his relief, she didn't linger on the subject. "Going back to the problem at hand, if the Chancellor finds out about our knowledge of him, he could still very well ruin the Jedi publicly and socially, if nothing else."

"Then he would likely set up situations that would whittle down their numbers even more. It could potentially be just as devastating, simply not as satisfying," Anakin concluded.

Master Xio thought about that after she finished typing. "You're describing a very... overconfident man."

Anakin couldn't help a small smile at her words, thinking back to his son's observations. *'Your overconfidence is your weakness*.'

"If Sidious has an exploitable flaw, it is his arrogance."

"He's a phenomenal actor then. 'Arrogance' and 'overconfidence' are not the words that come to mind when describing him."

Anakin didn't answer, mainly because nothing needed to be said.

Master Xio went on, defining a solution to the problem as best she could. "So we need something to counter a campaign like that. One of our own, perhaps?"

"If it is something that can be implemented subtly as soon as possible, it will have more chance of success."

"I will speak with Master Yoda," she said. "What would happen to you, though, if he discovered any of your secrets?"

Anakin swallowed. "He will either try to turn me to his side… again, or have me killed before I do more damage."

"We'd have to keep you here, then," she said, muttering and making more notes. "Keep you safe."

Anakin shook his head. "It won't make a difference."

Master Xio stopped, blinking at him as if that didn't compute. "But the Temple is a fortress. He can't get in… can he?"

The former Sith's smile held no mirth this time. "There have been temple break-ins in the past. And what safety I did have would be gone if the Jedi were forced off of Coruscant." Not to mention he would *not* do well in a cage. He'd always fought against his captors in one way or another, and that would only get worse now. His racing circuits had been his outlet recently, and even though he knew such outings couldn't last indefinitely, having that taken away right now would not do well for him. Or likely, the Jedi.

"In addition, I would only have sanctuary here so long as I was young enough. Even if the Council let me stay for some reason, defenses eventually fail. Jedi can out-perform most sapients. Emphasis on the word 'most'. I could give you a list of bounty hunters and pirates off the top of my head who could take on Jedi and would have a good chance at winning." Jango Fett, Cad Bane, Aura Sing (although, to be fair, she was Force Sensitive), Jena Zan Abor, Granta Omega, a good number of Mandalorians (some including Death Watch, as much as he hated to admit it). He'd even, reluctantly, put Honda Ohnaka and his crew on that list, at least under certain circumstances – and Honda happened to be very good at creating favorable circumstances.

"So we'll have to address the Temple's security?" the mind-healer asked.

Anakin shook his head. "While that is a good idea, there is no such thing as an impenetrable fortress."

She frowned at that and cocked her head to one side. "How would you respond to that situation, then?"

Fortunately, the former soldier had thought about that. "Were I confined to the temple, I would likely go mad." And then he'd snap and do something rash, like confront the man himself. Or start killing people who got in his way. Or both.

"But how is that different from...?" she faded off as she realized the implications. "You... don't stay exclusively in the temple now... do you. That's what you do that's dangerous… isn't it."

Once again, he chose not to answer, simply quirking an eyebrow ever so slightly.

"Right. We'll... have to address that at some point."

"To be fair, Master Yoda knows," Anakin pointed out. Well, he was pretty sure the old master knew. For the most part. "As does Siri. She's begun to come with me, recently."

Master Xio's eyes widened again, then narrowed. "I... see. Well, there's that at least, I suppose. I will have to have a talk with them as well, then. Good thing Master Yoda's coming today." She looked entirely too happy when she said that. Anakin frowned and probed her Force signature. No... no darkness. He let out the breath he'd been holding as the Jedi Master blinked and then looked back at him, concerned.

"What was that? Is everything okay?" she asked.

"You just seemed... rather happy to get a chance to yell at him."

She blinked for a moment, then snorted. "Oh, it isn't that. I just find it effective to let people know of my displeasure and it tends to be easier to present it as a smile. It's one of the few habits still lingering from my Knighthood days."

He quirked an eyebrow again. "You do know it won't have any effect on Master Yoda, right?"

She deflated a little. "True. Ah, well."

"When is he coming?" Anakin asked.

"He should be here soon," Xio replied, looking at her chrono. "Very soon. Now, actually. Where is—"

Right about then, they both felt him slowly approaching from outside.

"Apparently he was hiding his presence," Anakin said dryly.

"Indeed," the mind-healer said with fond exasperation.

"Once a troll always a troll?" Anakin asked.

Xio whirled around to him, shocked. "Anakin!"

He grinned, unrepentant. After a moment, she let out a chuckle. "It's good to see you joke... although we should probably work on your sense of humor."

The time-traveler just shrugged, still smirking. "Mine is better than Obi-wan's was."

"Was?" she asked.

He shrugged again, although this time with far less amusement. "I don't know him as well now."

She frowned and looked like she wanted to say something, but the door opened and Master Yoda hobbled in.

xXx

After the usual formalities and greetings, Tai'k decided to get right down to business.

"Master Yoda, we were discussing some of Anakin's more… dangerous habits," she said as she shot the boy a pointed look. He gave a few tells of embarrassment, but otherwise just stared straight at her. She couldn't help but think that even that must show how much he'd come to trust her and Master Yoda.

"His escapades from the temple, you speak of?"

She frowned and glanced at the time-traveler again. This time he looked away, although his expression remained stoic.

"He says they can be dangerous."

The Grandmaster just looked calmly at Anakin. "Dangerous, leaving the Temple can be." Well, he wasn't wrong. Just what details did he know?

"What exactly do you do, Anakin?" she asked sternly.

He looked right back up and met her gaze again, all tells gone. That… was not a good sign, for his mental health or for the nature of his

excursions.

"I race speeders."

What.

Anakin continued, either not noticing or not caring about Tai'k's surprise. "There's a local, floating ring that tends to switch between bases, although I usually go to one in particular. I race speeders so I have enough money for any… future ventures."

"Future ventures?" the mind healer probed.

"Currently I am funding the rescue and rehabilitation of slaves on a fairly small scale."

There were so many issues with that she didn't know where to start. Fortunately, Master Yoda seemed to.

"Rescue them, how do you? On Coruscant you have been."

Anakin didn't answer for a moment. She had a feeling they weren't going to like this. So many red flags...

"I have a… contact who acts as a go-between."

"Contact?"

He sighed, deflating just a little. "A bounty hunter."

What.

"He is an honorable person, despite his chosen profession."

The mind-healer resisted the urge to rub the bridge of her nose. "Define 'honor'," she said. "Which code does he follow?"

He definitely suppressed a wince there. "The Mandalorian code. The Old Code."

She had to close her eyes and take a deep breath, releasing all of her worry to the Force. "Anakin," she said, "do you know what Mandalorians – especially *old code* Mandalorians – think about Jedi?"

A pause. "Yes."

"And he hasn't tried to kill you?"

"Not yet…"

Still not getting any better.

"Does he even know you're a Jedi?" she asked.

She really didn't like all of his hesitations. "He knows I study here."

Tai'k frowned and she noticed Yoda's ears drooping a little. As much as she wanted to continue on this subject, another thought at his words struck her. She'd never really considered it before, but…

Her stomach clenched at his avoidance. She could only think of one reason why he wouldn't answer that outright.

"Anakin… do you not consider yourself a Jedi?"

His mouth thinned out at that but he looked her firmly in the eyes when he answered.

"No."

The mind healer forced herself past what felt like a punch to the gut. She… *thought* she understood, but at the same time, did she? It made no sense to her, and yet…

"I… I'm going to need an explanation, I think." She really just didn't understand. He was an initiate. He was taking classes. He was here in the Temple, helping them.

The boy let out a long sigh. "Jango Fett and I actually have very similar views on Jedi."

This… was getting worse by the second. Had she misjudged his progress? Had Girth as well?

"Tell us, will you, what they are?" Yoda asked, voice soft and sad.

Anakin looked away again, this time more out of focus than embarrassment. "I joined the Sith for a reason. I cannot agree with the Jedi tenants – not all of them, in any case. And while I cannot agree with the Sith tenants either, that doesn't mean I automatically revert to Jedi teachings. This universe is not as simple as 'Jedi', 'Sith' and 'Non-sensitive'.

"The basic principles of both orders… they failed me once. Perhaps I just understood them incorrectly, but the idea of embracing peace and

ignoring emotion seems just as wrong as the idea of peace being a complete lie. I want to be better – I still believe I can relearn morality here better than just about anywhere else at the moment, but that doesn't mean I can live by the Jedi Code.

"There are good people here – good examples and good influences. There are also not-so-good examples and influences, but I don't believe that negates the good the Order can do. Not anymore. I've always fought for people. I don't fight for ideals. Perhaps that makes me unwise or childish, but it is how I have always been."

He paused and coughed a little. "It didn't help that I grew up hearing about the great Jedi who were peacekeepers of the Galaxy – who would come and save everyone one day. Even after coming to the Temple, I still had the underlying thought of 'that's what a Jedi *should* be.' The Order never lived up to that. I realize that is my own fault," he said that through gritted teeth – him and his pride, "but the Order certainly didn't help with some of what they expect from it's members. Did you know that in less than a decade, over half the younglings will be given *command* – an army *rank* – and told to fight on the front lines of a war? Do you know how often I took my own padawan into battle?

"Some peacekeepers. All I could see as I grew up in the Temple was how everyone preached to me how I was *wrong*. How I could never be *right* unless I completely agreed with them. And then, everyone else felt it was fine to toss their morals out of the airlock." He shook his head. "Jedi are good people – flawed people, and… I realize expecting differently is unhealthy. But I cannot abide by their – by your tenants. I will happily work along side you to save the universe, but I'm not sure I can ever come back here – not fully."

Silence fell over the room as Tai'k breathed a quiet sigh of relief. While the idea of him rejecting her own ideals hurt in its own right, she could also see where he was coming from, and she couldn't say she blamed him either.

"Is that why you haven't accepted Padawanship under Siri?" she asked, half to let him realize that she wasn't upset and they could continue the discussion without her subsequent rejection of him, and half because that made a lot of sense and she wanted confirmation.

"Partially," he responded, looking relieved, although he did shoot one uncertain glance at a very still Yoda. "But it also didn't feel right."

"Plan on staying with us, how long, are you?" Yoda asked with no inflection. Tai'k shot him an uncertain glance herself.

Anakin straightened a little. "Until Palpatine is taken care of… at least. Although I wouldn't wish to leave the people I've come to care for so readily, either. I suppose, I will stay as long as the Council allows me to."

Yoda put his hands on his gimmer stick and then hid his mouth behind them, looking contemplative, if troubled. "Think on this, I will. But back on track, we should come, yes?"

Both Anakin and Tai'k nodded.

"I don't want to give up racing. It's an outlet for me, right now and something that helps me plan for the future. Also, Siri accompanies me to make sure I don't compromise the Temple's defenses, and to assist should something happen."

Which he didn't think would occur from the tone of his voice.

"Hmm. While live here, you do, follow the rules, you should. Exist for a reason, they do."

Anakin's face went blank again. "I will, if you demand it," he finally said, practically through gritted teeth, "but I don't think it will be beneficial to anyone mentally." He shot a glance over at the mind healer. "This is probably my oldest remotely healthy coping mechanism." One he couldn't give up when he was working on so many new behavioral issues while confronting his former abuser.

This time, Tai'k gave in and rubbed the bridge of her nose. Truthfully, the fact that he could see that his racing may not be the healthiest was a step in the right direction, albeit a small one.

"He's right," she said to the Grandmaster. "I don't like it, but taking this away from him right now wouldn't be advisable."

Yoda just let out a, 'humph', and then a nod. He wasn't happy with it either. Which brought her back to just one more point she had to make before they moved on.

"You realize that we don't like you putting yourself in danger like that because we care for you and your safety, right, Anakin?"

His expression softened the slightest touch. "Yes."

"Then your homework for today is to think up other potential coping mechanisms that aren't so dangerous as racing in an underground circuit that could replace this mechanism. We won't implement them for now, but I'd like to discuss ideas of ways you and those who care for you can both find acceptable for you to release your emotion and energy on."

Anakin didn't look happy (more like resigned), but he did nod and agree.

"Very well then," she said, looking down at her data pad. Ah, yes. "Now to discuss permanently discontinuing Anakin's sessions with D40…"

Eventually, they decided that permanently retiring the droid would be fine, and Yoda promised he'd try to stall the Council from calling Anakin in as much as he could, but pointed out that he'd have to face them eventually and speak about his 'dark master' with them. Then Master Xio wondered if they could limit Anakin's time in front of the Council, as that was something she could definitely advocate for. The Grandmaster seemed sure the Council members would agree to that initially, but depending on what Anakin told them, could advocate for longer meetings later on. Now they just needed to figure out what Anakin could say that the Council would believe.

It was still a plan forward, even if not one any of them were particularly looking forward to.

Chapter End Notes

AN:

*I did get most of this directly off of the Web MD and NIMH websites, but I remember similar wording in my college textbooks, so I'm pretty sure this is accurate and up-to-date.

So, I'd like to thank all the people on my Discord. We've been having some fun discussions and I really appreciate some of the knowledge you guys bring to the server. I was really worried about starting a Discord, but people have been trying to be polite and while there have been a couple of problems here and there, everyone has acted like an adult that can step away for a minute to cool down and others are willing to step in to let people know that things are getting heated. So thank you, guys. You're the best!

Discord: https://discord.gg/zJQSDa8

I have drawn one picture over the stream (as practice), which can be seen here: www.deviantart.com/obi-quiet/art/anakin-and-Ahsoka-cropped-856064469?ga_submit_new=10%3A1600931225 or you can just go to Obi-quiet.deviantart.com and look in the Star Wars folder. I'd like to draw more, but I've been dealing with health issues and then family problems. I'm hoping to get into it more, although people might just have to deal with me drawing my original webcomic instead. *Shrug* Sorry, it's what needs to get done.

This is likely the last therapy chapter for a while. It's mainly to show that even when things go well with Palps, that doesn't put Anakin at ease. Probably not a bad thing in some ways, but an be mentally damaging in others.

In a couple of chapters, we're probably going to be getting a short time skip, but it will likely be a couple of weeks at most.

I may not reply to everyone's comments, but I read, seriously consider and look forward to every single one I get.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Khalthar, Carradee and Quathis for all of their help, as always, and AngelGidget for the new cover artwork! (ARTWORK *dances* and it's so good too!)

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin walked out of the intergalactic com unit with a smile on his face and a spring in his step. His youthful body and mind at work, and he found he didn't mind for once. He was thankful the Council had donated an old but perfectly functional intergalactic comm receiver to his mother. They still couldn't talk often, but every time they did, it lifted his spirits – exactly what he needed after the last couple of weeks. She always helped him feel lighter and more hopeful. Padmé made him feel the same. So had Luke.

Actually, now that he thought about it, most people he'd gravitated towards had projected that hope. Obi-wan, Ahsoka, the Clones, Siri… Perhaps that's why he liked and trusted Girth so much? Even Master Xio and Master Yoda to an extent.

He made a mental note to bring it up to his mind-healers. It was something about himself that he found positive at least, so—

"Initiate Skywalker," the voice of the master supervising his comm conversation, one Mace Windu *again* (why would he want to be the one supervising? Did he distrust Anakin that much? So badly that he wouldn't even trust another Council Member to oversee it?), sounded firm and unyielding, pausing Anakin in his tracks.

"Master Windu…" Anakin said slowly, before turning and bowing ever so slightly. "Thank, you for helping me today, sir." He made sure his voice sounded light and sincere, but wasn't surprised when the older man's visage didn't so much as twitch.

After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, Windu shifted from his position leaning against the wall and stood up, arms falling by his side.

"Would you spar with me?"

Anakin could have sworn that the universe froze and started up again.

What?

It took him several seconds to even register what the man had asked,

let alone manage a reply. Had he honestly heard that? Was Mace Windu – Mr.-defnition-of-stick-up-his-backside, actually asking *an initiate*, one he *didn't trust* to *spar?!* He didn't know what to think about that. Had such a shock happened in his past, as Vader, he would have likely just waited there until whoever had approached him with something so ridiculous explained… or he would have just destroyed the nuisance and gone on with his day. He couldn't imagine Mace approaching a teenaged Anakin and… he had no precedence for this. Not for a personal, one-on-one bout.

Finally he was able to formulate a response, mostly from asking himself what Obi-wan would do.

"Excuse me?"

Mace just studied him for several more seconds, then opened his mouth. "Would you spar with me? I know you have nothing on your schedule right now and you usually spend free-time in the training salles or with Knight Tachi, or both. I would like to spar with you."

Anakin blinked. Why would he want to spar with him? "I'm… an initiate."

"Yes," the older man replied, completely blank faced.

Anakin realized he couldn't turn the man down, if only because of curiosity. He still couldn't come up with a reason as to why Mace Windu would want to spar with him of all people. Unless…

Oh, Force, he wasn't thinking about taking Anakin as a *padawan*, was he?! It took every ounce of willpower not to jerk away in disgust.

Not.

Happening.

But…

No, that didn't make sense either.

Oh, this would drive him back to the dark if he let it go.

So he bowed, a little lower than before. "Of course, Master."

Windu nodded tersely and began to walk towards the training salles, leaving Anakin to fall into step behind him. It galled Anakin to do so, but he had a facade to keep up, so he swallowed his pride and did as

was expected… for now.

Ten minutes later, they both stood in a private room off one of the main salles, bowing and drawing their purple lightsabers.

"Don't hold back," Mace said.

Anakin blinked, taken aback. Right about then he realized he'd walked into a trap, but before he could withdraw, he found himself parrying as Windu came at him full force. With Vapaad.

Anakin grit his teeth. He could keep up, but it took all of his concentration to do so.

And it was at a level far above that of an initiate.

Kriff.

"You know," Mace said as he fought, not slowing down once, "after our first conversation in Master Xio's office, I found myself wondering how a child could point out so many issues with the Jedi Order and the code." He went for a low sweep, but it turned out to be a feint as Anakin went to jump, only to almost run his body directly into an upper cut instead. Blast Vapaad and it's feints. At least Anakin had studied Juuyo and had seen it coming.

Mace went on, not acknowledging Anakin's impressive dodge. "You brought up some good points. It didn't take me long to conclude that your questions had stemmed from your darker lessons. Basically, I revisited the spy theory."

Anakin frowned. He wouldn't be saying anything about this if he'd come to a dangerous conclusion. Not unless this was an execution to be framed as a 'training mistake'. Anakin doubted it, though. He sensed no killing intent from the other man. This wasn't a real fight – even if it felt like it.

"And?" was all Anakin could force himself to say as he ducked and rolled, thankful for his recent incorporation of form IV into his typically form V style. He was keeping up with the other man, if barely.

"Then I saw you with your mother," Windu said.

Anakin almost faltered.

Almost.

He actually had to jump away to avoid the next strike as the Council Member continued. "Either you're an amazing actor," he went for another strike, and Anakin knew he didn't have the stance to jump how he needed to just then, so he countered, matching blade for blade. Windu smiled as if having something confirmed. Then he struck, hard and faster than before, knocking Anakin's blade out of his hand. He cursed silently and froze as Windu's blade stopped an inch away from his neck.

Anakin *still* wasn't good enough. And that rankled. But he was more focused on what the Council Member had just said.

"Either I'm an amazing actor… or?"

Mace smirked. "Or you are not a typical darksider."

Anakin felt his heart rate spike, but he just narrowed his eyes. "Darksider?" he asked.

The dark-skinned man scoffed. "The only counters to that particular Vapaad strike you just countered would come from Soresu, Vapaad or Juuyo. You didn't use Soresu and I know I haven't taught you Vapaad."

Anakin felt his face fall into something mostly blank, but vaguely threatening. He hoped it covered his panic. "And Juuyo is a dark form."

Windu didn't lower his lightsaber, but he did raise his eyebrows expectantly.

"You know I was trained in the dark," Anakin started.

"I know you were far deeper into it than you let on," Windu countered. Then, much to Anakin's surprise, he flicked his lightsaber off. The time traveler blinked. He'd expected to be marched straight before the Council, and likely to a holding cell.

"Let's be real, kid," the Korun Master said, folding his arms. Anakin noticed he hadn't put his lightsaber away, so Anakin didn't call his own back to him. The last thing he needed to do at the moment was antagonize this man. "Most of the Council can't see it – either because they don't have the knowledge to put it all together or because they don't want to – but I know the dark side. I had to study it to develop my fighting style. I know you studied with the Sith, and I know you're

more than just an amateur when it comes to their ways."

Anakin didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say, to be honest.

Windu sighed, deflating just a little when the initiate didn't defend himself. "If I wasn't positive you hadn't told Master Yoda more or less everything, this would likely be a very different conversation. But I'm also convinced that you really do want to change. Your questions may have come from a dark view point, but that doesn't make them less valid."

The former Sith felt his eyebrows approach his hairline.

What?!

Had Mace Windu, of all people, admitted that a darksider had a point?

Anakin slowly moved his hand to his other arm and pinched. No, that hurt… this wasn't a dream or hallucination and it had been too focused to be a Force vision.

"The Order is about to go through some major changes, thanks mostly to you," and if he said that a little grudgingly, well, it was Mace Windu. "We were stagnating, as an Order, and we hadn't even noticed."

No, Anakin *had* to be dreaming. He hadn't heard about any changes before this. Well, he had heard that the field leaders of the different corps were coming to the Temple, but he hadn't expected anything remotely close to what Windu had eluded to. *What changes?*

Windu must have read his incredulity because he shook his head. "And that, right there, is what I can't figure out. You *want* the order to change – to be better. Is that why you came here to begin with?"

Anakin saw little point in trying to keep up the facade. He still felt uncomfortable and vulnerable without his lightsaber. So he walked calmly and carefully, broadcasting his every move, over to his weapon to pick it up.

"No. I did not come here to change the Jedi. It is… merely a happy side effect."

"But you still want us to change."

'Us'. So Windu was sure enough to label Anakin as 'not' a Jedi. Well,

he couldn't say he particularly minded, in all truth.

Anakin very obviously clipped his lightsaber to his belt.

"Yes."

"For the better?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Anakin wanted to scoff. Why did he want the Order to change? Where could he even start with that? He had a list a parsec long.

"Because you need to," he finally decided on. "For your own survival and the betterment of the Universe. As you are now, you will do neither."

Mace's eyes narrowed. "Are you helping us to spite your Sith Master?"

Anakin almost snorted in amusement. Of course Mace Windu would jump to that (entirely too correct) conclusion.

"That… is a large part of it."

The older man sighed. "I should have known."

Anakin shrugged. Nexu couldn't change their stripes.

"How old are you, really?" Windu suddenly asked.

The former Sith stiffened. "Clarify that…"

The Korun Master seemed to be studying Anakin deeply. "My theory is that you got tired of your life – tired of the darkness – and used a Sith technique to transfer your consciousness to a child's body. I know we have records of at least one technique that has worked before, even if it has an astronomically low success rate and incredible complications.

"You wanted to start over."

Anakin blinked. That was… surprisingly not far off from the truth.

He sighed. "I did not ask for this, nor did I seek it out. I also did not use any dark technique to come here. This is the body I was born with. Otherwise… you're not wrong."

"A clone?"

Anakin sighed and didn't answer. He really didn't want to get into it right now. Especially not with a Jedi he still didn't trust. "Are you going to detain me?" he asked, trying to keep the challenge out of his voice.

Windu didn't say anything for several seconds. Then:

"No."

Anakin blinked. "Why not?"

Windu put his lightsaber away, then walked slowly forward and held out his hand. "Your lightsaber. May I see it?"

Suspicion stole over Anakin's face, but he eventually decided to humor the man. Maybe begin to build some sort of trust between them. Stranger things had happened to him, after all.

He put the hilt in the other man's hand. Windu turned it on, purple light washing over them both.

"This isn't red."

Anakin furrowed his brow, wondering what the Korun Master was getting at.

"This isn't bled and it isn't synthetic. This color represents both the light and the dark, even if it is masterfully built," he flipped the switch again and watched as the blade gained length. An old trick that using different kyber crystals in one hilt allowed.

Windu shut the blade down and then tossed it back to Anakin, who caught it easily, still watching the other man warily.

"You sneak out at night, sometimes, but while you seem to put yourself in danger, you don't seem to put the temple at risk. Actually, you take great pains to make sure the Temple is still secure when you leave."

Anakin put a hand to the bridge of his nose. "Does everyone know about that?"

Windu didn't answer with anything more than a shrug. "I don't like it, but if I told you to stop, would you?"

The former Sith snorted and shook his head.

The Council Member nodded as if he'd expected that. "As long as you continue to take Tachi with you, I'll allow it. However, we will continue to watch you. If you do anything to put the Temple at risk, we will have problems, understand?"

Anakin nodded. He was getting off very easily here.

"Good," the bald man said firmly. "So when are you going to tell us about this Sith Master you're so against that you'd actively team up with Jedi?"

The smaller figure scowled. "You won't believe me. I was trying to get proof."

Windu frowned. "Is that what you're sneaking out to do?"

Anakin didn't answer, his eyes narrowing. If he said he'd been sneaking out to get information on Sidious, that would definitely qualify as 'putting the Temple at risk'.

"No," he finally said.

The frown on the other man's face deepened. "Then when would you be able to—" he cut himself off and his eyes widened.

"He's in the Senate."

Anakin couldn't help the small, impressed smile that tugged at the side of his mouth. "Yes."

Windu looked like he'd fallen into a daze, although only someone who knew him pretty well would be able to tell.

"Do you see why I haven't come before the Council now?" the former Sith asked. "Do you think they'd believe me without proof?"

"Probably," Windu said, still distracted and thinking.

Anakin blinked, surprised. "Really?"

The man refocused his gaze on the boy in front of him. "We've been waiting for you to come to us. We know you have information we need to hear."

The irony of that statement…

The former Sith remained silent for several seconds, contemplating. Should he go before the Council? Should he tell them about Palpatine?

"What if," he started slowly, suspiciously, "I told you he was in a position of power over the Senate?"

Mace became very still. "How much power?" he asked carefully.

Anakin repressed a scoff. "A lot."

More silence. "I'll have to look into it."

This time, the time-traveler didn't bother trying to hold his scoff in. Just as he'd figured, Windu didn't believe him. Disappointing, but not surprising.

"Until then," Windu gave him a respectful nod, "thank you for the spar."

"You're welcome," Anakin replied as neutrally as he could. Then Windu turned and walked away. Well, at least he trusted Anakin enough to turn his back on him.

The former Sith's fists clenched hard and he had to take several deep breaths, focusing on releasing his emotions to the Force. Funny how quickly disappointment can become anger. He hated how he could still get so angry so easily.

As he followed Mace Windu out at a far slower pace, he couldn't help but be grateful that that night would be a racing night.

xXx

Anakin breathed deeply. The smell of grease and metal and the fuel residue always calmed him. Yes, he could also smell the unwashed bodies and the decades of built-up grime too, but the former scents brought a sense of safety he couldn't get anywhere else.

"Well, you look happy," Siri said from beside him.

"I'm here and we've been racing," he said.

Siri snorted through a smile. "I'm kind of surprised it's so easy to bring your spirits up."

Anakin shrugged. "When I'm not breaking under the weight of my life or trying to keep myself angry, I am a man of simple pleasures."

Another snort and a shake of her head, the blond pony-tail whipping around her. She'd decided to come as herself today, although she usually did when going racing. They'd both added a fairly significant amount to their winnings tonight. Not that Anakin had much he was using it for recently anyway. He'd have to tie up some loose ends when it came to that, and find a way to restart his little campaign, but it really wasn't something he could take care of at the moment.

"One final race." Bleersh drew their attention as his gelatinous form more or less rolled up to them. In one approximate of an appendage with a glove on the end, he held up a speeder key. "Who's takin' it?"

Anakin and Siri exchanged glances. He'd taken most of the races that night and she hadn't said a word seeing as he'd really needed the distraction, and it had helped. However, he knew she liked racing almost as much as he did. Oh, she'd never said as much as it wasn't exactly good Jedi behavior, but she had a bit of an adrenaline addiction and enjoyed it more than she'd admit. He almost felt bad for taking all of the good races tonight. Almost.

She raised her eyebrow at him, humor behind the gaze. Anakin just rolled his eyes, although he couldn't suppress his own grin. Funny that he wouldn't have been able to have this kind of easy camaraderie with her even a couple of months before. Two years ago, he'd have barely been able to smile. Perhaps he had come a decent way towards healing like Girth and Xio insisted.

"Go on," he finally said, waving his hand nonchalantly.

She emphasized her eyebrow raising. He just returned her stare a little wryly. Finally she shook her head, still smiling, and grabbed the key.

"You rest here, old man," she yelled over her shoulder.

"I'm still younger than you!" he called after her. He counted the years she'd been dead because it was still experience she remembered.

"Ha!" she said before disappearing around one grimy corner that would lead her to the racing circuit.

"I don't think I'll ever get you Jedi," Bleersh said after a couple of seconds.

It was Anakin's turn to snort in amusement. "We aren't typical. At all."

"Uh-huh," Bleersh responded then shook his head… or at least, that's

what the former Sith figured the shuddering of his body meant. "I'll see you in the stands once I finish entering your partner there."

Anakin blinked at that. Partner, huh? He supposed she sort of was… in an older-sister kind of way. He'd never had an older sister before. What a strange concept. He wasn't sure if he was entirely comfortable with that thought (he'd had bad experiences with older-sibling-figures before) but it was a far cry better than the barely functional relationship right after they'd come back in time.

Shaking his head, Anakin made his way to the make-shift stands before the holoscreen where the race would be broadcast. He grabbed a seat next to where he knew Bleersh would want to sit and waited. The stands were half-hazard, grimy constructs at best and it honestly surprised Anakin when they held as many sapients as they did without giving way. He sat down, although he regarded the dirty bench with disdain. He'd have to take a shower when he got back to the Temple.

The dim lighting overhead fizzled and glitched as it tended to do this far under Coruscant's surface and several small groups of suspicious people gathered together in pockets all over the stands.

Anakin watched them curiously. He hadn't had much of a problem with anyone targeting him in a while, but he knew it would only be a matter of time before someone did again. Gamblers tended to not like 'the wrong' people winning.

It was his usual paranoia that had him paying attention to a twinge on the edge of his senses. He frowned, closing his eyes and focusing on the feeling more. It wasn't malicious, per se, but it wasn't benign either… and it was coming up right behind him.

His hand fingered the blaster he held under the large coat he wore to the races. It was set to stun. If someone started something, he'd finish it.

The person stopped when they stood directly behind him… Who?

Wait… he knew that signature.

His eyes flew wide.

"Well, well, well… if it isn't Anakin Skywalker… or should I say, Luke Lars?"

He whipped around and came face to face with the last person he

thought he'd see there.

"Jango Fett…"

Chapter End Notes

AN: *Runs away cackling*

What? People wanted to know where Jango was. *evil grin here*

Well, in all actuality, I didn't expect Mace Windu to come in like that. He just did... kind of demanding everything that happened.

Thanks again to Khalthar, Carradee and Quathis for your help on this, as always!

Come yell at me on Discord: discord.gg/BtZFtvX Thanks to my awesome community!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin's organs turned to ice.

"*...Anakin Skywalker... or should I say Luke Lars?*"

He couldn't have said that.

He… *couldn't* have.

Except, he had… but… *how?!*

It didn't matter. Jango was a threat now that had to be eliminated. He couldn't let the man take that information to Sidious. He had to do damage control, which meant—

Someone bumped him as they slid past and into a seat drew his attention and his head shot around, taking in all the beings surrounding him. Jango had chosen his confrontation spot well. Anakin couldn't take care of the "problem" immediately. Too many people would see. Anyone could be recording this… he couldn't lose control now. That would give him away to Sidious just as much (if not more so) than Fett taking in the information.

That didn't stop the darkness from calling to him, offering itself up. All he had to do was take it. His fingers twitched, itching to kill the man in front of him – to eliminate the threat. He had to do *something!* He—

Ana...! Wh...'s ...ong?!

Siri's voice cut through the panicked static in his mind. Her presence seemed so quiet and felt so far away that he could barely tell what she'd asked, but it still managed to get through to him. He blinked, clamped down on everything with an iron will, he couldn't allow himself to feel anger… or guilt for what he had almost done, not now. Then he took a deep breath, although it did little to quell his inner panic.

Jango Fett! He practically shouted back through the Force. *He knows! I have to kill him, Siri! But I can't! I can't kill him!* Not in cold blood…

Not like this…

"You really didn't think anyone would figure it out, did you?" Jango asked.

Anakin turned his (far too wide – stupid childish body!) eyes to the man but couldn't make himself say anything. He didn't trust what would come out of his mouth if he opened it.

The man must have noticed something, though, because he put his hands out to either side and slowly sat down, making himself less threatening. Anakin blinked. Boba Fett wouldn't have… well, he probably wouldn't have bothered confronting Anakin at all… so why had Jango? Why was he even here? Was Sidious here too?!

The panic that had been slowly fading flared up again and he threw his senses out. He found… nothing. He couldn't sense anything but Siri and the general *distrustfeargreedanticipation* that permeated the area. That didn't mean the Sith wasn't there. He could hide himself from Jedi Masters so… No, no Sidious wouldn't be here without an entourage of some sort. Why show up here at all, even? He wouldn't have had to wait for something like this to confront Anakin, he'd only have to wait for his 'initiate' to show up to the Senate. Unless he wanted Anakin quietly taken care of without getting traced back to him…

Jango kept watching Anakin warily.

"You really were a slave, weren't you," he said, not like a question, but it was quiet and soft – almost soothing.

Anakin still stiffened, and he struggled to keep control. He began releasing his emotions to the Force almost desperately, practically shoving them away only for them to grow back worse than before. He clamped down on them even harder and forced himself to focus on the area around him. After a few seconds, he realized that no one else seemed to have any malicious intent directed at him, so he allowed himself to focus on Jango, trusting the Force to inform him if someone did decide to attack. He didn't like it, but he didn't really have any other choice at the moment. He needed all of his mental faculties to focus on Jango.

The bounty hunter still hadn't gone for his blaster, continuing to hold his hands out as if it would make him any less dangerous. Anakin knew the kinds of gadgets he had in his suit… but he wasn't wearing his helmet. Mandalorians – even disgraced Mandalorians – always

wore their helmets to attack.

The man kept up the soothing tone as he continue to speak. "I tracked you down here because I need a couple of questions answered." Anakin didn't relax and his eyes narrowed. Who did he think he was fooling? Jango cocked his head to one side and he let the 'non-threatening' mask go a little. "I didn't take this information to anyone. But it will go out in a galactic standard hour if I don't stop it."

Part of Anakin almost melted in relief. If a Fett said he hadn't taken his information in yet, then he hadn't. The other part of Anakin couldn't relax because if that information went out… It was a good thing he'd stayed his hand, near as it had been. The idea of Sidious getting such vital information… He could feel his paranoia growing into something almost living, straining to reach out to the darkness.

He swallowed his fear as best he could. "I'm sorry, what information, sir?"

The man's expression dried out. "That was one of the most ridiculous cover-up attempts I've ever seen."

Anakin shrugged (he hoped it looked more natural than he felt). "I had to try."

Jango snorted.

They sat in silence while the stands continued to fill.

Ana—n? He sensed Siri probing worriedly. *I'm o… …y way.*

Good. He wasn't on the brink of snapping and destroying everyone around him (anymore), but he knew it wouldn't take much to send him over the edge. If things went spectacularly badly, this could go plunging into a black hole very fast. And events in his life had tended to go very badly recently.

"So, how is it that you can act and speak like a mature adult?"

What was that about going spectacularly badly? Him knocking on karma's door? The man *had* to start out with that question? For the third (fourth? Fifth?) time in the last few minutes, he felt his panic crawl up his throat and it was all he could do to keep it from bursting out of him. He couldn't open his mouth (again) so he just stared at the man, face blank.

Fett seemed to mistakenly take that as a cue to continue speaking. "I mean, it could be a Jedi thing, but somehow, I don't think so. You also said you've trained as a Sith, and yet you were taken here to live with the Jedi a little over two years ago – directly from slavery that I can trace back to the beginning of your life – or very nearly. The math isn't adding up, but you weren't lying. I can tell a lie half a parsec away. Comes with the territory and all."

Funny, he didn't remember Obi-wan saying Jango Fett was a lie detector. Or talkative. Boba certainly wasn't. Then again, Jesse could talk the ear off a wampa and no one wanted to get Kix started on a lecture. Ever. But this wasn't one of his men. This was a dangerous, vindictive and very damaged bounty hunter, so Anakin didn't dare interrupt. He knew if he opened his mouth, he'd give something away – or he'd snap and kill this man who *couldn't seem to take a hint and shut up*, kriff anyone else seeing. He'd just have to kill them too…

And yet, the very idea made him so sick. He didn't want to go back to being that… that thing. That monster.

But did he have a choice at this point?

He'd have to find a way to stop the information from getting to Sidious… That meant he couldn't kill Jango… not right now. That conclusion worried and relieved him at the same time. The dichotomy wasn't helping.

The man kept talking. "I chalked it up to Jedi mambo-jumbo. Or perhaps Sith mambo-jumbo?"

Anakin's fists tightened by his side. He hadn't had such trouble dealing with his ever changing emotions since… well, Dooku.

No, that was very much not something to think about right now.

"I looked into the Sith. There isn't much on them, but the credible sources claim that they weren't just 'evil Jedi' as many opinions seem to state. Personally I don't see a difference—"

"Then you're a fool," Anakin finally heard himself say. Jango couldn't see the difference between a Jedi and a Sith? Anakin had to admit he had difficulties himself, at times, but one thing he saw from 99% of the Jedi were their intentions. Did they always do the right thing? Kriff, no. But they *tried*. The Sith Anakin had known (and been apart of) didn't even bother doing that. Many actively tried to hurt the people – the galaxy – around them, often for the sake of a power trip

or even just kicks and giggles. Sith *enjoyed* pain. Or, at least, they were encouraged to. Well, Bane's line was. He couldn't be so sure of the ancient Sith that fought the Jedi before the Ruusian Reformation.

Jango, having finally gotten something from his quarry, closed his mouth, studying the boy in front of him intently. "Those aren't the eyes of a child."

For the first time, Anakin tore his gaze away from the other. He'd already given away too much. Just a couple of words, two sentences, and Jango could deduce things he shouldn't. He wished he had something he could focus on besides this conversation. It almost reminded him of talking to… Palpatine. Wait, he had brought his stress ball today as he'd made a point to have it on him at all times. Gratefully, he reached into his pocket, focusing on opening and closing his fist. Jango noticed but didn't say anything, choosing instead to keep talking.

"Not even a slave child," the man went on. "But I've seen those eyes on soldiers. The ones that regret the most."

Anakin squeezed the ball hard. He wished he had his breath mints on him.

"And assassins. Those that managed to get away somehow."

"I am not an assassin," the former Sith practically hissed.

Jango didn't look convinced. "Funny, you have the tells of one."

Anakin felt as if he'd been slapped. Hard. He had the tells of an assassin? But even as Vader… he'd been the *enforcer*, not the trained killer… except, what was the difference? Assassins simply did their work in the shadows. As Vader, he hadn't bothered with shadows. He'd just… killed. Indiscriminately.

The panic returned, worse than ever.

He could swear he heard the breathing of the suit – his lungs couldn't get enough air! He should use that– no! No, he couldn't use his negative emotions anymore. He *couldn't*… not…

He needed to calm down.

Luke, think of Luke.

Anakin!

And Siri.

That helped. Calm. Deep breaths, hold, let it out… just like Siri had done for him.

And he had to *think*.

Right.

He was at the racing circuit… with Siri… and Jango Fett had just found him, outed him and that caused him to panic.

Why, though? Why was he panicking about this? He hated that he had the 'tells' of an assassin… but it made sense. It wasn't like he hadn't known about his actions or the consequences… even if he'd never put it in that particular perspective. Why was he having so many issues now?

Because someone who knew what to look for had pegged him as the killer he was – as the monster he was. This after two years of healing and therapy. Serious therapy. *From two therapists and a kriffing droid*. And people could still tell… was this all pointless? Would he ever escape the shadow of Darth Vader? Or would it always be evident? No matter what his therapists said.

Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.

Was he fighting a losing battle?

The panic *was* subsiding, but seemed to be drowning under a wave of horror and depression instead of simply fading.

He'd suspected, but… they'd almost had him believing he could do it. They almost had him *believing*...

He—

"Anakin!" Siri's voice caused both him and Jango to turn to the side as the blond came rushing forward, a very unhappy Bleersh behind her, judging by the color of his gelatin-like epidermis. It wasn't completely transparent, fading into something opaque after a couple of inches, but the skin tended to change color with extreme emotions. Not like shapeshifters, but enough to make a noticeable difference.

Siri looked half-way between panicked and determined, but almost as

soon as she came into view, she froze and looked between Anakin and Jango for several seconds.

"Oh," she said. Then she turned to Bleersh. "It looks like we'll have to skip out on that last race."

"But I already entered you!" he protested.

Siri shrugged. "Take it out of our winnings for the day. Please go and get them as soon as possible. We have a long discussion ahead of us."

The sapient (Anakin still didn't know his species) looked ready to argue for a moment, but then he must have realized the futility because he sighed, deflating. "Fine. Fine. I'll be back."

As he turned and slithered off, Siri walked towards them and sat down next to Anakin, making a point of not touching him and facing the bounty hunter. She eyed him pointedly.

"And who are you?" Jango asked, voice warning. "His Jedi Master?"

She scoffed, loudly. "Hardly."

"I have no Jedi Master," Anakin said, his voice quiet. He didn't deserve one.

Jango's eyes narrowed. "Who are you, really?"

Anakin almost didn't hear him. He could hear his heartbeat, his blood rushing through his veins, so loud he wondered why no one else seemed to notice.

Beside him, Siri tensed. "What do you mean?"

Jango looked back and forth between the two of them for several seconds as the race started on the screen behind the two Force users. Around them, people began cheering loudly.

The bounty hunter finally shrugged and fixed his gaze on Anakin. "If you were trained as a Sith, then you can't be the child who was taken at the age of nine from Shmi Skywalker to be a Jedi. So who are you really?"

Anakin's world stumbled to a halt and everything seemed to hang in the air for a moment that lasted an eternity. Then he was bringing his hand up, almost before his mind had even registered. He'd gathered the Force, no longer sure which side he'd drawn on, and not entirely

caring at this point. He just had to eliminate—

A hand on his arm stopped him.

The world went back to standing still.

Slowly, Anakin forced himself to turn and look at Siri. She was staring at him, *concernfearpain* flowing off of her. She was biting her lip, her brow furrowed… Then he realized and recognized her pain. That was his fault. He was dragging her down again. Part of him recognized that as unimportant. Part of him recognized that he needed to stop and listen… but he didn't want to. If he didn't act…

"You," she said to Jango, somehow able to sound perfectly normal despite what he could feel in the Force. She stood on the verge of diving right back into their past, but from her tone, no one would know. She continued after a short pause, "Need to stop talking. Now." Her words held no room for argument. Then she turned to Anakin, completely dismissing the bounty hunter, and let go of his arm, very pointedly.

"I'm sorry I touched you like that without your consent, Anakin. May I touch you again?"

It was too much… everything was too much. He wouldn't have this problem as an adult! Even as an adult Sith! He'd realized before how his child's brain couldn't *compute* like he needed it to. It showed in his words and thoughts and actions and every other aspect of his life. He was an adult trapped in a child's body, and it couldn't handle him. It couldn't handle the thoughts and memories and stress… He'd known before, but he hadn't *known*, not like he did right at that moment. Like sticking a program into a computer decades old… no wonder he could barely function.

"Anakin, I need you to nod or shake your head."

Oh, right… she'd asked him… touch? Something to ground him. He'd spoken with Master Xio and Girth about such things before. Right…

Slowly, and ever so slightly, he nodded. It felt jerky and surreal. Was he going into shock? Over an outed secret? How weak was he? No wonder children needed protection. If he hadn't had any previous experience…

He felt something on his shoulder, a hand. He focused on the hand.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Coruscant."

"A little more specific?"

"The illegal racing circuit, third base, Senate district."

"How old are you?"

"Eleven standard years."

"What is your name?"

"Anakin Skywalker."

"List the people who mean the most to you."

He glanced over at Fett. Was that such a good idea? Although, most of the people really important to him weren't even alive at this point in time. Or Fett already knew about them. And he needed to focus on the questions because if he focused on Fett, he'd still likely kill the man and he couldn't and who would even think that?! And—

"Anakin?"

Right. Focus.

"Shmi Skywalker. Padmé. Luke Skywalker. Leia Organa. Ahsoka. Rex. Obi-wan. Siri Tachi. Girth. Tai'k Xio. Coira. Hik'te, Bale, Maelee, Thoran..." As he went on listing the names of the children he'd come to be close to, then the clones he'd trusted his life to, the world began to slowly filter in. He could hear the shouting of the relatively sparse crowd and the thrum of the racers. He could smell the dust and grime and oil and unwashed bodies and old metal that always permeated Coruscant's underground.

Then he realized he had arms around him, tentative and loose, as if the unsure hold could break at any point, but they were there and he was rocking back and forth.

Something his mother would do.

"Okay, now focus on me."

"I'm not a child," he whispered, although he couldn't seem to find it inside himself to pull away from her. It was a lie, plain and simple. He

may have the memories of a 45-year-old Sith, but he had the mental and emotional capacity of an eleven-year-old.

"Yes, you are," she replied back, calling his bluff.

He clutched at her, closing his eyes and doing as she instructed, finding her in the Force and focusing on her presence. She helped him release his emotions, and it helped. After a few minutes he took a deep breath and finally found the strength to push away from her.

"Thank you," he said. Then his eyes focused on a very quiet Jango. Suddenly, he was very grateful he hadn't cried.

His thoughts went back to what Jango had just said and he grit his teeth, but forced himself to focus. The last thing he needed to do was allow himself to go down that immature line of thought again.

"So, you went after my mother?"

The bounty hunter didn't answer. He didn't have to. Anakin took another deep breath.

"The Galaxy's existence may very well depend on your answer to my next question so I suggest you answer truthfully. Is she alive?"

A pause and Anakin didn't need the Force to feel the other's suspicion, but he did finally answer.

"Yes."

A weight lifted off of Anakin's chest. Jango wasn't lying. As Vader, he'd gotten better at sensing dishonesty. Jedi (and Sith) weren't lie-detectors, although the best trained of them could be close. Anakin could tell from a combination of body language and the general aura of the person in the Force. Said aura was something that all sapients had, although it was something that could be manipulated by a Force user, hence why Palpatine could hide his lies.

Still, his mother was alive. That felt right. Nothing like the horrible, twisting foreboding from just before the Clone Wars…

It took Anakin a few moments to remember that he'd seen his mother earlier that day, before Mace Windu had accosted him. Even Jango couldn't have gotten from Tatooine to Coruscant in that time, even if he'd attacked her right after they'd hung up. Stang, he wasn't thinking straight again… Had he tapped into the dark side? He paused and

took stock of himself and the situation. Yes, he could feel its taint. Barely there, but still leaking into him nonetheless, twisting his thoughts and memories.

He cut that off immediately and felt his head begin to clear.

"Good," he replied, both to his own thoughts and to Jango.

More relative silence as the crowd around them cheered a little louder, then calmed down.

"Are they… treating you?" the man asked slowly. "I suppose I could have mistaken some tells…" he said the last under his breath, only half to them.

Anakin blinked. Was that… concern?

"What?" he asked, still trying to make his child's brain work again.

Jango felt distinctly uncomfortable and frustrated in the Force. "For your PTSD and panic attacks?"

And that suddenly, Anakin Skywalker, former Sith Lord, wanted to melt into the very metal under his feet. Oh, Force…

"Yes," Siri said. She still had a hand on Anakin's shoulder. Part of him felt grateful, and part of him just felt embarrassed. It wasn't a feeling he was used to.

"Well, you're doing *something* right, then," the bounty hunter said to the blond with a sneer. Anakin wasn't looking at her, but he could feel Siri roll her eyes.

A beat of silence, then Jango spoke again, gesturing to their surroundings. "If he's having so many problems, why is he here, racing? Aren't Jedi supposed to care for their younglings? Protect them?"

Before Siri could answer, Anakin snorted. The sheer hypocrisy of that statement. Jango had willingly let his clones – his *vod* – be trained for a war they'd fight at the age of ten to twelve years. Maybe he didn't consider them family, but Boba had also learned to fight at a young age himself.

Still, that would bring up far more than he was willing to get into (or could explain) at the moment.

"You misunderstand," he said instead. "Siri wasn't calming me down to protect me, she was calming me down to protect you."

And the unimpressed disdain returned. He had to be at least partially Force sensitive for Anakin to pick up on his feelings that easily.

"So that is what the Jedi teach you? Such arrogance?"

Anakin laughed, a little hysterically. The crowd around them yelled, some in anger some in excitement as one of the racers pulled off a stunt.

"That is not me being a Jedi. That is me trying *very* hard to not be a Sith…"

Before anyone could say anything else, Bleersh oozed up to them, still looking very unhappy.

"Here you go," he said, holding out some data chips in one blobbish appendage. "Usual arrangement."

"Thank you," Siri said, reaching out. That was when Anakin noticed the blaster held out of sight of Jango. He blinked and looked up at Bleersh's many eyes, trying to comprehend. Why would he go out of his way to help them? It took him a minute to remember that Bleersh was a businessman. He wanted to protect his profits. Anakin still found he appreciated the gesture, especially when the alien's three alternate eyes on the side away from Jango darted down to the blaster and back as if in question.

Siri must have caught it too, because Anakin sensed warmth and gratitude from her as she clasped the gelatinous pseudo-hand.

"Thank you," she said, sincerely. "We'll be able to handle it."

This time he turned his eyes to glare at Jango. "You sure?" he asked.

Siri nodded and glanced at Jango too, annoyance seeping into her aura. "Yes."

Bleersh watched her for several seconds, then turned to Anakin, as if to double check. He nodded as well.

"Fine," Bleersh said, still unhappy. "But if something happens, let me know. If I can help, I will. If not, I can at least save my own hide."

That was… actually a pretty generous offer from an underground

racer.

"Will do," Siri promised. "Thank you."

Then she turned to her two companions. "Well, shall we retire to some place more private, gentlemen?"

Anakin could feel Bleersh watching them as they rose and filed out, side by side initially, but then they got to a hallway they'd have to go through single file. Siri didn't trust Jango at her back. Jango didn't trust either one of them.

So he turned to the man. "Do I have your word that we will reach our destination alive and have a civil conversation?"

Jango regarded him with narrowed eyes.

"Yes," he finally said.

Anakin nodded and stepped forward. He heard Siri sigh behind him, but no one objected. He counted that as a win.

xXx

It took them about twenty minutes to find a cheap outdoor cafe where they could order food. Anakin insisted on this, and while he could tell Jango wasn't happy, the bounty hunter went along with it. That… was actually a very good sign and did more to calm Anakin down than anything else Jango had said or done.

Honestly, Anakin had just wanted to get food out of habit. He'd met Dooku over food almost every time they'd spoken, and Jango as well. It was a good, non-suspicious reason to meet in public, and while their discussion would most certainly not be public, none of them trusted the other party enough to go somewhere truly private.

Their mostly silent travel had given Anakin time to calm down, for which he was grateful. At least he'd gotten to a point where he wasn't about to Force-choke the bounty hunter the moment something startled him.

"So," Jango said when they finally got situated.

Anakin held up his hand and reached into his pocket. Then he pulled out a jammer and set it down on the table. He knew Jango had his hand on his blaster out of their sight and would have pulled it on

Anakin had he tried to bring a weapon out. However, a jammer was definitely another thing, and perfectly reasonable in this situation.

Jango looked at it for several seconds, inspecting it, then he nodded and finally lifted one of his hands onto the table top. He'd ordered a drink while Anakin and Siri had both gotten full meals. They were fast, cheap and very unhealthy, but they would also fill their stomachs and both needed that right now. It would also give them something else to focus on if the conversation grew too awkward.

"So?" Jango asked again. "Tell me how an eleven-year-old kid has the eyes and tells of an assassin, the PTSD and panic attacks of a war veteran and the confidence of a mature adult without any actual history for any of that."

Anakin stayed silent as he contemplated everything with a calmer mind. It certainly helped.

If he didn't answer Jango satisfactorily, or if they killed him, Palpatine would get the information he'd need to put everything together. So he had to come up with a plausible explanation… and honestly, he couldn't come up with one that didn't come very close to the truth. Caught between colliding asteroids.

He'd simply have to tell him the truth – or something very close to it. This was getting out of hand.

He knew this would come back to haunt him, but it was either that or risk having all of their plans exposed now. The idea of reducing everything to square one – except with Palpatine *knowing* was enough to make his mind up.

He always had been reckless. Even if Vader had tempered or at least directed that recklessness, he'd never really lost it. If he had, the Emperor in the future would not have died in a reactor shaft.

Anakin sighed inwardly, his mind made up. Then he debated a few seconds longer before deciding to go with the explanation that would make the most sense to a non-Jedi.

"Two years ago, when I was still a… slave on Tatooine…" He paused, frowning. No, he needed to begin earlier. "I have always been different. I could sense things others could not, could learn faster, could build mechanics with an almost innate understanding, always picked out dishonesty, had reflexes far above that of a normal human child… I used to race in the circuit on Tatooine."

Jango, who still hadn't put his helmet back on, narrowed his eyes.

Anakin nodded, unable to stop himself from being a little smug. "I won the Boonta Eve classic. It is how I won my freedom." Twice.

He took a breath, grateful that no one interrupted him.

"About a galactic standard week before the competition that year, I received a vision."

Jango actually scoffed at that and Anakin felt his expression cool. "Jedi can jump several times their own height, dodge blaster bolts, move things with their mind and have empathy that often borders on telepathy. Part of the reason they move so quickly is because they see or know how to move – with the Force, they can predict it. That is how Force Sensitivity works. Now take that to its extreme."

The bounty hunter still didn't believe Anakin, but was far less skeptical.

"Force visions are… tricky, though," the younger time traveler went on.

This time, Siri snorted.

Anakin shot her a commiserating look and she took that as a cue to explain.

"We get visions without context most of the time. Flashes of what could happen but not what does or doesn't lead us there. At least, most often."

"However, there are times," Anakin picked up where she left off, "when we get full-on glimpses into past lives, future events and even happenings on the other side of the galaxy. Although it usually requires special circumstances, it isn't unheard of.

"I am not entirely sure what sparked my vision," there was probably more lie to that than truth, but they didn't have much of a choice, "but in one night, I dreamed of a path my future could take… for the next forty years." Thirty seven, actually, but semantics. "I woke up the next morning with both the knowledge of a Jedi knight and a Sith Lord. Philosophies, histories, tenets, politics both inside and outside each 'order', members, goals – both individually and as a whole. Even though I had never actually been behind the controls of a ship in my life, I could fly one. Once I arrived here, I could navigate the Jedi

Temple with no problem. I knew the senate building, levels and paths of Coruscant – a world I had only ever seen in holo-vids." He shook his head, "I knew far more than a nine-year-old slave from Tatooine should, with far too much detail to dismiss it as false."

Jango scoffed and sat back in his chair. "You expect me to believe that?" he asked.

At this age originally, Anakin would have gotten angry, demanded the man believe the truth. Now, he merely clenched his jaw, took a deep but silent breath and released his emotions to the Force. He should have known the bounty hunter would respond like this. When he had first seen Jango, he hated to admit it, but he'd panicked. On their way out of the lower levels of Coruscant, he'd managed to calm down and had eventually entered a sort of cold clarity that bothered him – reminded him far too much of his time as a Sith, at least when he hadn't been a raging inferno of hate and anger.

He didn't like his current mind set… but he also needed it right now. A fight with Jango – physical or otherwise – would not benefit anyone but Sidious. Strong-arming his way through the situation would only make it worse, so he had to find another way. Too bad he'd never been good at any other way.

Forcing himself to move past his annoyance at himself, he tried to think of what Obi-wan – the most persuasive Jedi he'd ever met – would do. Then Anakin realized his former Jedi Master would probably simply accept that he couldn't change the man's mind and move on to try for lesser victories. He'd compromise.

And maybe that's why Anakin had never been good at negotiation; he hated compromising. He always had. It felt too much like allowing someone control over him. Fortunately, he had enough experience in the recent two years of forcing himself to compromise to fall back on, so he simply shrugged and took a bite of his meal.

"Believe what you will," he finally said.

Siri seemed taken aback at his unusually calm demeanor because she turned to blink and then stare at him. He shot her an unimpressed look. She blinked at him a couple more times, then seemed to accept the development as she turned to focus on Jango.

"Do you have a better explanation?" she asked.

Jango sat forward. "I've seen the kind of biological programming

people can do with the right equipment and skill set."

The utensil in Anakin's hand paused as it rose towards his mouth. Then he slowly lowered it back to his plate. Did Jango think he'd been *cloned*? Or grown, with false memories implanted somehow?

"Even saved memories can be programmed into a mind. Someone from long ago whose memories were found either by those doing the programming, or by whoever wanted to bring him back…"

Anakin released his utensil before he broke it. His mind went over everything, making connections. He wasn't liking the picture he got back.

"They seek out a pregnant woman, implant those memories into a child and then the woman manages to get away with that child, only to end up being caught by slavers. The memories help the kid know how to train and then he sees a way to be safe from the people who wanted him to begin with: go away with the Jedi. After all, programmers have *fail safes.*"

As much as he hadn't liked the cool calculation, it was better than a cold fury… but the connotations…

He forced himself to breathe.

"Anakin?" Siri asked, brow furrowed in worry and unease. Right. He would not lose himself again.

He. Would. *Not.*

Obi-wan would tell him to let it go… but he still had to know… to confirm.

He never had been a good negotiator.

"You knew of the chips," he said softly.

Beside him, Siri gasped softly. She turned to look at Jango, her own shock covering what would likely be fury soon.

Jango didn't answer, although he seemed to be studying the two of them with new interest – and suspicion of course. Then his face blanked and he shrugged nonchalantly.

"Chips?" he asked.

Anakin was about to do something he knew he'd regret later – although he found himself struggling to remember why he would care – when a hand gripped his arm. He looked down at it, almost not comprehending why someone would be stupid enough to touch him right now, then followed the hand up to a very pained, familiar face.

"Not now," Siri whispered, half desperation half frustration. "You promised."

He sensed his rage slipping away enough that he felt he could keep a hold of it now.

He took a deep breath.

Jango snorted. "I see the Jedi are doing a wonderful job of training you – someone who already has so much training."

Anakin's laugh was soft but no less mocking for it. It also held no small amount of incredulity. Was this man *trying* to get himself killed? Because he seemed to be making a rather good attempt at it.

"I warned you before, but apparently the message requires repetition: That is not me trying to be a Jedi," he said, voice low although he had no doubt Jango heard it. "That is me trying to not be a Sith. You would be wise to learn when and where to stop."

Jango scoffed. "And as I said before, I don't see a difference."

"Then you are still a fool," Anakin shot back. "And a slaver and a cold-blooded murderer. And here I thought even disgraced Mandalorians had some honor."

The bounty-hunter's face darkened significantly. "Maybe it's you who should be careful about what you speak of."

"Really?" Anakin had had about enough of this man's *ridiculous* attitude. "Do you know what those chips really do? Inside the clones' heads? Because if you even have an inkling then you are not the man I thought you were."

"Are you always this blatant when not hiding behind a mask? Did you really think I would tell you so you can—" Jango started sarcastically but Anakin cut him off.

"They don't suppress aggressive tendencies. Or if they do, it is a secondary function at best. On that chip, you will find a list of over

100 orders. Or, at least that is how many each chip has when the clones are finally old enough to be sent into battle. Those orders consist of everything from committing suicide to murdering everything around them no matter who or what that may be – fellow clones, droids, separatists, *civilian children,* even the heads of each army, little good it would do."

Jango's eyes had widened in surprise, but Anakin found he couldn't stop now that he'd started.

Kriffing child's brain and puberty-ridden body!

"The orders themselves, however, are not the worst part. How they will be received is. The clone will not be able to refuse the order – will become a puppet trapped in their own body, a slave to the whims of the man you now work for unable to stop their arms from raising or their fingers from pulling the trigger. That is what you have become, *Mando'a*," he practically spat the word. "Someone who would turn their family – their *vod* – into true slaves, merely for profit!"

He hadn't thought much about Rex and Cody and Kix and Echo and Fives… Fives. The clone who had died trying to expose the threat of the chips – who had somehow known enough to figure it out. It hurt to think of them. As Vader, he'd drawn from that pain. As Anakin, he couldn't afford to… and now it all came sweeping back.

He half expected Jango to attack him… but the man just seemed to be staring at Anakin in disbelief and horror.

"You're… not lying."

"Of course we're kriffing not lying!" Siri cut in, a hand on her forehead, bracing herself.

The guilt from that made Anakin calm some and he turned his thoughts inward, focusing on breathing and releasing everything to the Force again. Like he had been doing for most of that night, it seemed…

"They told me… nothing like that," Jango insisted. "They said those chips would have some orders on it in case a message needed to be passed quickly, bypassing questions. They never…" he paused, and then closed his eyes as if putting it all together.

The fact that he hadn't known as much as Anakin had assumed went a long way towards soothing him.

After several seconds of tense silence, Jango turned to the Jedi with a troubled but still suspicious gaze. "I still don't believe you, but I need to do some digging."

He stood, grabbed the box of to-go food he hadn't even opened and turned to leave, never allowing them to fully see his back.

"Do not send the information to anyone," Anakin said before he'd completely left the hearing (and jamming) range. "I will find you if you do and you will truly understand the difference between a Sith and a Jedi."

Jango just scoffed and walked away.

The two Jedi continued to sit in silence for several minutes afterwards, Siri looking at him in exasperated disapproval while he continued to cool down.

"Well," Siri finally said with a tired sigh, "that could have gone better."

Anakin snorted mirthlessly and slumped against his chair. "I'm sorry," he said.

She waved her hand halfheartedly at him. Either she'd forgiven him already, or she was too tired to talk about it at the moment. Or both.

He shook his head. "I thought I'd be over this by now," he whispered. "Over the darkness and the anger." Siri glanced over at him, but didn't interrupt. "But it is still there – always there, just waiting for me to make another mistake. It had been getting better, but now… I seem to be having far more problems than I did a year ago." He slumped further as he looked up at Siri, his eyes half-lidded with exhaustion. "Why?"

She looked at him for several seconds before she seemed to realize she didn't know the answer and should probably not attempt to answer it.

"I think that's something you need to ask Girth or Master Xio," she finally said.

Anakin frowned in disappointment, although Siri very obviously tried not to let it get to her – but he did nod in acquiescence.

"Come on," Siri said, standing up and grabbing her own box of food. "We're late and we still need to deposit our funds tonight before we get back to the Temple."

The younger time-traveler nodded and stood, taking his own food and the jammer. He looked around as they left the rather empty plaza. Coruscant never slept, and it wasn't difficult to find restaurants open day and night. However, they'd only been able to see a couple of other people in this particular area – a large reason as to why they'd chosen that spot for their impromptu conversation.

"Should we just call for a transport back to the temple?" he asked tiredly. It had been a long night and he really wanted to go to bed. Hopefully he wouldn't have any dreams.

Siri thought about that for a moment before finally shrugging and nodding. "Probably not a bad idea. We can just have them make a couple of stops on the way."

In that moment, he felt a surge of gratitude that he had Siri with him. That he had anyone with him at all had been a saving grace, but she… she had really become his support. She'd either stopped him from falling or pulled him back from a fall at least thrice now. He was grateful Obi-wan had asked her to come as well. It could have been someone worse – like Mace Windu. That would… probably not have been very conducive to helping him save the world as they would have likely driven each other to the dark side. (In Anakin's case, again.)

Half an hour later, Anakin and Siri were let through the front door of the Temple. It wasn't terribly unusual for Jedi to come back at ridiculous hours. The guards assumed they were master and apprentice

and let them through. Both of them were too tired to argue or correct.

They made their ways through the Jedi Temple, parted at the proper junction, each heading off to their own room. Not twenty minutes later, they were both asleep.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you again to Carradee, Quathis and Khalthar for help with this chapter. Extra long, so I hope you all enjoy it! Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!
>
> Discord Link: discord.gg/hKSvnnBVJY

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So, let me make sure I'm understanding this," Master Xio said, her voice a little unsteady with disbelief. "You've been racing – something I still don't necessarily approve of and we will need to address more healthy coping mechanisms eventually – specifically to fund your own personal war against slavery, and you're doing so by hiring a bounty hunter that hates Jedi."

"I had hired him," Anakin said, trying not to sound (or feel) sheepish, "before he figured out that I was likely a Jedi myself."

The white-haired woman nodded with a strained smile. Anakin couldn't tell exactly what she was feeling at the moment, but while he doubted it was anger, he also figured that if anyone could drive their therapist to the dark side, it would be him.

"Right. On top of all of that, this is a man who is working – knowingly or not – for the very Sith we are trying to stop any information from getting to. And this isn't just any random mercenary either, he's an extremely intelligent, very well trained man considered the best of the best of his home world – a world that basically worships fighting, battle and war as well as the skills that will allow one to excel at them. And he had enough information to figure out that your identity as a grown alien, Luke Lars, is also the eleven-standard-year-old Jedi Initiate, Anakin Skywalker. Have I left anything out?"

Well… when she put it like that.

He never would have made this mistake in his 45-year-old body.

Part of that may have had something to do with the dark side, but mostly, he suspected it came back to child's brain and hormones that he currently had to make do with.

Again.

"That is… an accurate, if succinct description."

Master Xio closed her eyes and took a breath, obviously trying to gather her thoughts. Besides her, Yoda was giving him a distinctly

unimpressed look while Girth seemed troubled, if thoughtful. Anakin sat in his seat across from the three of them, trying not to twitch uncomfortably. Former Sith didn't twitch. Fully trained Jedi didn't twitch. Eleven-year-olds did, but that was besides the point. When he'd woken up the morning after he and Siri's 'talk' with Jango, he'd contacted the three of them to ask them to come to his meeting with Girth today. Fortunately, Master Xio and Master Yoda had both been able to make room in their schedules.

Eventually, Master Xio looked over at Girth who glanced at her and shrugged, his nose twitching as what Anakin had come to realize was a wan smile crossed his lips. He gestured for her to continue.

She sent him a smile of thanks and turned back to Anakin, face impressively calm if her previous frustration was anything to go by.

"Anakin, I have to say that while I am impressed by your good intentions and initiative, this is also what we mean when we say you have reckless tendencies, likely from your Emotional Regulation Disorder. Can you honestly tell me you thought through all of the consequences of your actions when you hired this man? The possible outcomes? The risks that even contacting him represented?"

Well… no. Thinking through all of the possibilities had never been his strong suit. He'd thought he'd gotten better at it recently, but now that he *really* thought about it, perhaps not. What was worse, he wasn't even sure he could entirely blame that one on his youngling-brain.

"I did think through some of the possibilities," he said softly.

Another slow intake of breath. "Yes or no, Anakin," she said, not unkindly. "Did you think it through as much as you could have?"

She wasn't trying to be condescending. He knew that. It still rankled a little. He quickly squashed that annoyance and took a deep breath. Then he looked her in the eye, straightened his shoulders, and shook his head.

"No."

She nodded, managing another small smile, but it felt both more real and more sad somehow.

"Then what could you have done to prevent this situation?"

Sighing, and trying to let his irritation at being treated like a child go

(his body *was,* and he needed to accept that fact), he thought about it for a moment before he spoke. "I approached him because I know that as far as bounty hunters and mercenaries go, he's one of the most honorable. He rarely minces words when asked a direct question and follows a code – one I know. I thought I could hide my identity from him. Who would believe that the tall possible Jedi and the Jedi initiate were the same? It would have worked had he not been there to free my mother when the Jedi went to free her." He paused and his heart still skipped a beat in happiness over that thought.

He turned to Yoda and smiled warmly. "Thank you again for that, Master Yoda."

The ancient master just nodded his head humbly.

After a moment, Anakin looked back at Master Xio. "I could have put more time into researching a trustworthy mercenary who would have been able to do the job." He'd had a lot on his plate at the time, but honestly, he could have found someone else had he not been so impatient. Jango Fett wasn't the only mercenary out there who was good at what he did. He wasn't even the only honorable one. And, to be fair, Anakin *had* sent out several other inquiries… but he'd known which one he'd put more time and effort into hiring.

Part of him was sure it had to do with the fact that Vader had gone to certain bounty hunters during his time in the Empire, and he'd known who he could trust to get the job done. He hated the idea that he'd relied on anything that Vader had taken comfort in, but now that he looked at it, it was the simple truth. He'd been impatient, he'd taken a shortcut to save on time and stress. He was now paying the price for it.

Master Xio seemed to deflate a little as she nodded. "Yes, the timing was… unfortunate, but I do think the point still stands. If you want to make a change or act on an impulse – if you feel you *have* to do something – think it through as much as you can. Then take a step back and think it through some more. Try to find different angles and look outside of the box. I know this may sound basic or like overkill, but changing yourself comes about by reducing your actions and thoughts to the very basics and building new habits from scratch."

Yes, he knew that. From what he understood, even adults in adult bodies with adult brains that needed to change their lives had to go back to the childish basics to do so. That may be the one thing this child's body was actually good for – forcing him to return to the basics

of his personality and working from there. That and the energy. He'd missed this energy as an adult.

He'd known all of this before he'd even come to therapy to an extent. That didn't make it any easier to hear or impliment.

"I… have gotten better," he half admitted, half defended himself.

Her smile warmed considerably.

"I don't doubt it. I may not have known you but from what you've told us… well, we are proud of you." She turned and gestured to the others. But then her expression turned pointed. "That doesn't stop the fact that this was still reckless and something that could have been avoided. It isn't something we can change now, but it is something to remember for future reference."

Anakin sighed but nodded. "I will remember," he said. He didn't know if that would fix anything, but he would remember. He doubted he could forget.

"That being said," Girth spoke up, "I must say that your control of your temper was impressive. No one got hurt, no one died, and no one… er… Fell. Is that the correct term?" he asked, turning to Master Xio.

She nodded. "Indeed."

Anakin snorted derisively, remembering the pain on Siri's face. "I almost Fell a minimum of three times and definitely touched the dark side."

"Hmm, but use it, you did not," Yoda commented.

Girth nodded. "Exactly. I know you may not feel like it, but this is actually a positive development, Anakin. Confronted with something that you were not expecting that definitely threw a hydro-spanner into our plans, your first instinct for decades was to reach for the darkness and to eliminate whatever was in front of you. That is not an easy habit to break."

Anakin almost snorted again. Didn't he know it.

"But, after only two years, you recognized it and you fought it. The instinct was still there, but that doesn't stop the fact that you *won*."

Anakin stared at the three beings sitting across from him, all nodding

in agreement to Girth's statement. He… had fought it. Hard. But he wouldn't have been able to succeed if…

"Again, only because someone was there to stop me."

Girth's own snort was soft and somehow encouraging. "That's what a support system is for. And the thing is, even if you had help, you still made it – you still fought it. And from what I understand, that is no small feat."

Anakin opened his mouth to protest, after all Girth knew very little of the Force, but Yoda beat him to it.

"Right, Healer Girth is," the Grandmaster said. Anakin slowly closed his mouth as the smaller being continued. "Relying on others, a weakness it is not. Hear this often, you do, hmm?"

Yes, this was just the latest in a long line of people telling him that. It didn't make it any more believable.

The old troll shook his head. "Rely on others, you should, until stand on your own against the darkness, you can."

If he could. That didn't look like it would happen any time soon, but he didn't want to voice that thought right now. So he looked away from Yoda, but nodded anyway.

"Yes, sir."

Yoda harrumphed. "A slave-master, I am not. If believe me, you do not, then say so, you can."

Well, he hadn't kept his silence for that reason, but he did appreciate Yoda voicing the thought. A very small, but real smile tugged at the corners of his mouth and he nodded his thanks. Then his expression fell as his mind returned to the subject at hand.

"I hate having to rely on others," he said. "That failed me once."

The mind-healers exchanged glances while Yoda frowned.

"Failed you before that, did it?" he asked.

Anakin frowned. As a child, he'd had his mother and many of the other slaves. As a Jedi… well, he'd had Obi-wan later, but not initially. And Tru – his best friend. And Darra and even Ferus to an extent.

And Palpatine.

It always came back to him.

"No," he finally said, looking out the window and towards the Senate building. "But that once was enough." Well, there had been the mess with the other three Padawans on Korriban, but that had been just as much his own fault as it had been anyone else's. Like most things, he supposed. And he'd chosen to trust the wrong people on a mission here or there, but for the most part, approaching a problem with help hadn't been uncommon for him before he Fell, even if he hadn't consciously realized it at the time.

Which may have been why he hadn't known how to stand up to Palpatine without anyone else there to back him up.

"It worked too well," he said quietly, subdued. "I relied on people… and they left me alone. In the end, I couldn't stand on my own." Although, to be fair, he'd never tried. Oh, he'd tried to go against the grain, to change things to how he thought they should be and be the one everyone else could rely on, but being truly independent had never been one of his goals. He'd actively worked against the ideal, to be honest.

"Sapient, other beings are," Yoda pointed out. "Mistakes, they will make."

Well, yes. And part of Anakin's Emotional Regulation Disorder was the tendency to put people on pedestals that they couldn't continuously live up to. But he also balked at the idea of leaning on someone – emotionally or otherwise – he couldn't consistently look up to. Although… hadn't he been doing just that with Siri? He knew she wasn't perfect. He didn't expect her to come in and save him… and yet, she had. Maybe that was the key? To not expect help, but to accept it when it came? To not go to the extreme of total reliance or total independence? To be able to rely on others when he needed to, but be able to stand on his own when the circumstances required it as well?

To find the middle ground.

The balance.

Huh.

That seemed to be the answer to so many things – finding the middle

ground, the center road, the equilibrium. And he was the 'chosen one' after all. He was supposed to balance the Force. All life was born from the Force and all life returned to it. Would balancing normal, non-Force aspects of life also balance the Force?

It was a promising thought, even if he wasn't quite sure of all of its implications.

He realized that the room had gone silent and he filed the thought away for later contemplation before focusing back on the Grandmaster.

"I know that others will make mistakes… that's part of why I find it difficult to rely on them."

"But you know you cannot always expect yourself to shoulder every wrong," Girth ventured carefully, "correct?"

Anakin just stared at him, deadpan. "I would think that was obvious." Everything had gone so terribly when he'd shouldered too much for too long.

The drall didn't respond with anything more than a silent stare. And, to be fair, Anakin knew what he wanted.

He sighed. "Yes, I do know that."

Both Master Xio and Girth looked relieved.

Before they could say anything, though, Master Yoda inserted himself. "Spoken of this, before, we have. Gotten away from the original question, hmm? Return to that, we should."

The furry mind-healer sighed and nodded. "You are correct, Master Yoda," he said then shook his head. "What do we do about this Jango Fett?"

No one answered.

Looking at it pragmatically, they had two options: do something about him, or let it go. But what would they do about it? Try and capture him? Mandalorians had almost as notorious of a reputation for avoiding and escaping capture as Jedi did. *Without* the Force. And Jango was the best of the best. He'd been *enslaved* for years, from what Anakin knew, and he'd still managed to escape. With the kinds of conditioning freshly caught slaves went through, that was no small

thing. And he'd only improved since then. Was it possible to keep Fett contained? Yes. But it was risky.

Or they could try to kill him.

Even if Anakin could convince the others it was necessary, that was not something he wanted to contemplate right now. Besides, killing him (again, *if* they managed to do so as it had taken one of the best duelists in the Jedi Order in just the right circumstances to kill him last time) might take care of the problem now, but knowing Jango, he'd have fail-safes that would utterly destroy any plans they could make for the future. He'd proved as much the previous night.

So if they took that option off the table, that left Anakin's least favorite option: just let him go. He hated the idea of giving up any kind of control to someone who hated him like that, but did they have another choice that wouldn't present worse problems and potential outcomes? If they tried to catch him and failed, he'd go to Palpatine. If they tried to kill him and failed, he'd go to Palpatine. If they let him go, he might go to Palpatine anyway.

They didn't have a lot of leeway here, and he knew which option would be most immediately satisfying, but… Which option would Luke prefer?

"While normally I detest waiting," he said slowly, choosing his words with care, "I think that is our best option here."

He didn't like it. He didn't like saying it. The very idea set him on edge. Letting go and trusting Jango to choose correctly, or trusting the Force again… Or both. Although, he did know and had openly acknowledged what could go wrong, which was not something he always had done. At this point, they may as well just assume Palpatine would discover his identity as Luke Lars and prepare.

He looked up to see the three of them smiling at him, each soft and warm and accepting and…

"What?" he asked, confused. Then it clicked and he had to refrain from rolling his eyes. He wasn't that bad. Hadn't been even as Vader. "I simply chose the best option."

Girth grinned, rodent teeth showing. "We know. And we are proud of you."

And didn't that just make his child-brain happy? Ugh.

He refused to acknowledge that aloud and simply focused back on the situation at hand.

Situation. Ha. More like the flaming garbage that was his life.

He sighed. "I feel that I should... apologize." That would never not be difficult to say. "Everything we've worked for is going up in smoke because I cannot keep my secrets secret."

Master Xio shook her head, disagreeing. "While you could have thought many of your decisions regarding this situation through more, you have made a good deal of positive progress as well. Learning to talk about your past has helped you more than you know."

Well, he had to concede that. "Maybe," he said as casually as he could, "but it will all be for naught if it gets back to Palpatine. And at this point, it most likely will."

The taller master sighed and nodded, sitting back in her chair. "Perhaps we should make contingency plans," she suggested.

"Hmm. Good to be prepared, it is," Master Yoda agreed.

Anakin didn't like having to acknowledge that they'd most likely failed *that* badly, but they were right. They had to have a contingency (or twelve) in place in case something did happen.

"I think we should sleep on it," Master Xio spoke up. "This is a lot to take in and coming up with our own ideas then pooling them and deciding on a plan appeals to me. Anakin and I can go over some of that the day after tomorrow, during our normal session, along with anyone else who wants to come. Until then, we should probably move on as I don't think we can be more productive today."

Well, she wasn't wrong.

Almost as if on cue, a knock came from the door. People wandered up and down the hallway outside on a fairly regular basis, so while Anakin had detected the presences, he'd dismissed them in favor of the conversation. Now, though, he realized who was out there and couldn't stop himself from wincing a little. Perhaps that was why Master Xio wanted to move on? She'd actually paid attention to the approaching presences?

The door opened and a Padawan Anakin didn't know stood there holding the hand of a five-year-old Togruta youngling.

"Skyguy!" she squealed before the Padawan, a human male with blond hair, brown eyes and freckles, could even speak a word. He looked over to the masters in the room, eyes pleading as the girl ran out of his grasp.

With a smile that seemed to barely hold back giggles, Master Xio nodded to him and shooed him away with her hand. His shoulders relaxed and he bowed before turning and leaving, the door sliding closed behind him.

Meanwhile, Ahsoka finished climbing into Anakin's armchair. She hadn't even bothered to ask this time.

"I'm mad at you," she said to his face, bottom lip jutting out and her hands on her hips. Then she settled next to him, barely able to fit seeing as they were both growing. Meanwhile, Master Xio had hidden her laughter behind a hand while Girth's didn't even bother, his chittering laughter mixing with Yoda's humming chuckles.

Part of Anakin wanted to sigh as now they'd have to be more mindful of the youngling in their midst and what they said around her. Part of him could only shake his head in fond amusement at her antics, and a third part of him was grateful she'd come. Both of the mind healers and Master Yoda wanted to make sure there wouldn't be any adverse affects on her after his panicked talk with Jango.

He groaned internally at the prospect of the conversation ahead. It had already been a long day.

"Anakin," Girth asked gently, "before we move on, I'd like to ask that we go back to the basics here. How do you feel?"

He sighed but gave that question thought. "Inadequate," he finally answered. "Overwhelmed, like I've failed… at times like I cannot succeed." He held up a hand to stall protests. "I know. I would like to *not* feel that way, but I do. I've either given in, threatened to give in, or been on the precipice so many times now… I know that once you start down the dark path it will forever dominate your destiny, but if that's true, why am I here? Why have I come even as far as I have?" It may not have been much, but it was *something* at least.

"Hmm. Why you are warned to not give into hate and anger, this is," Yoda commented, not unkindly, but definitely pointed.

"Dark?" Ahsoka asked and Anakin winced.

"Cold, the dark side is," the Grandmaster commented softly.

The torgurta blinked. "Dark side?" she asked.

Right, Anakin doubted she'd gotten to those lessons yet.

"Can you describe the Force, Ahsoka?" Master Xio asked. "Does it remind you of something else you know of?"

The youngling blinked, then put a finger to her chin in contemplation.

It was adorable.

"Kind of like a hug, I guess," she finally said, looking a little lost. "But warmer and… floweyer… and tingly."

Master Xio nodded, smiling brightly at the girl. "That's very good, Ahsoka. Now the Force is a source of power as well as light and comfort. But what you will learn later, in your classes, is that the Force has two sides to it. The normal Force, and the dark side. The dark side can seem very powerful, but it is very, *very* different. It's still powerful, but it is also very dangerous. It hurts people who touch it and use it."

She cocked her head to the side, confused. "But why would anyone want to touch it then?"

Because it's satisfying? It's alluring? It's addicting? Anakin had a list. He wasn't sure he wanted to explain any of it to Ahsoka.

"Ahsoka," Girth spoke up, not sounding condescending at all, but still managing a very calm and welcoming tone. He could see why the drall was a child psychologist. "Do you like candy?"

She blinked and nodded.

"But you know that having too much is bad for you, right?"

She nodded again, albeit slower.

"Having too much candy too often can do harmful things to your body. But even knowing that, if I gave you a sucker right now, would you still want it?"

She didn't answer, instead looking down and to the side. To her credit, she didn't lie at least.

"There are things, like suckers, out there in the galaxy that are even more harmful than sugar. Some make people forget bad things for a while. Some make people feel happy for a little while. Some make people not feel at all. And some," he glanced up at Anakin for a moment. He looked down as the drall went on. "Some give people a power or confidence boost. And some just make people have to have it again and again and again. Even though some of these things can kill you if you use them, some people, mistakenly, think it's worth the risk of dying."

She looked troubled, but she also seemed to grasp the concept at least.

Anakin wasn't sure that was a good thing.

"But… why?"

"Some people don't know how to be happy," Girth responded sadly. "Or they've fallen into habit."

"Habit?" she asked. Anakin got the sense she knew what the word meant, but not why it applied.

Thankfully, probably due to his experience, the furry mind-healer seemed to get that too.

"You get up and brush your teeth every day, right?" Girth asked.

Ahsoka nodded.

"You do it because your crechemaster tells you, right?"

Again, she affirmed with a nod.

"Well, what if she stopped telling you to. Would you still do it?"

She tipped her head to one side, thinking. "Probably."

"Hmm, decisive, Jedi are," Master Yoda piped in. "Be honest with yourself, you must. Would you?"

Ahsoka's jaw tightened in determination and she nodded at them firmly. "Yes. I would."

"That's because it's a habit," Girth went on as if no one else but Ahsoka had spoken. "You know it will do you good and you're used to doing it. Some people make bad habits, like waking up and eating candy instead of good food and not brushing their teeth. Habits can be hard

to break. Especially for those things that make you want them again if you try them. That's called addiction."

This time, Master Xio cut in with a nod to Girth. "Healer Girth is right," she said. "And using the dark side is one of those addicting things that make you think you're doing the right thing when you're not."

Ahsoka seemed to contemplate that. Then she frowned and looked up at Anakin. "The cold is like that? Addi… Additing?"

"Addicting," Anakin corrected with a sad smile as he nodded. "Yes, it is. Someone convinced me that using that dark power was a good idea. It took me a long time and a lot of pain to realize that I shouldn't have listened to him… but part of me still wants to use it. I try not to, but sometimes I don't even realize I'm using it. Because we have a bond, when I get close to using it, you feel it through me."

"But… it's so cold! Why would you want to?!" she asked, worried.

He put a hand on her head, between her budding montrals and rubbed it back and forth. "I don't want to. That's the problem."

She seemed to get it then. At least a little more if not fully. Kids really were more perceptive than people gave them credit for.

"I don't like it," she said softly, sitting back and folding her arms with a huff.

"Me neither," Anakin said. Then he gathered himself for the next words. They came more easily than they would have only a few short months ago, but somehow he didn't think it would ever truly be easy. Still, it needed to be done.

"I'm sorry, Ahsoka. I don't mean to scare you."

"I wasn't scared," she protested. He noticed she didn't say it was okay. Well, he was fine with that.

"Then how about I didn't mean to make it feel so cold?"

She pondered that, then nodded. "Okay. I forgive you."

Anakin sighed internally. She said it so easily. Had he ever been that young? That naive? That… whole? It probably didn't help that he still didn't feel like anyone should forgive him.

"You don't have to," he said, resigned. "With how often it happens – and it'll probably happen again, no matter how much I wish otherwise – I don't deserve it; your forgiveness."

He saw Master Xio close her eyes out of the corner of his eye, and Girth bristled, his fur standing on end. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but Ahsoka beat him to it.

"Of course you don't," she said, blinking as if wondering why Anakin didn't know that.

Well, he'd meant it, but that still stung coming from a child, even if she was agreeing with him. Girth's nose began to twitch in agitation.

But again, the little girl beat him to the punch. "Master Kobola says that no one really does. Forgiveness is a gift that is given, and it is never deserved. But I forgive you anyway because I know you don't *want* to make it cold – and it made me mad when you promised you wouldn't let it be cold anymore, but you *did.* But it's hard for you. I… don't understand, but we're still friends, Skyguy. I *want* to forgive you. It's my gift to you!"

With that she practically beamed at him. Anakin could only stare at her, mind completely blank, refusing to work.

Siri had said much the same – that she forgave him anyway. That it wasn't his to earn, but hers to give.

How… how had he missed these absolutely amazing people the first time? He'd cared for Ahsoka – deeply – and to an extent, Siri too, but he hadn't *realized* how absolutely and utterly amazing they were. Words couldn't seem to describe their almost other-worldly natures if they could *understand* as much as they did and *still* forgive a monster like him.

He felt a deep warmth begin to build in his chest, one that rose up his throat and he had to choke it back. He may be in a child's body but he would not cry, kriff it! Still, the feeling reminded him of something – of an all encompassing calm and *peace*. This is what being one with the Force felt like. These were the emotions that he could only just remember, and part of him longed to immerse himself in it again. But that wouldn't happen for a while. Thankfully, until then, he had these little reminders and they meant all the more to him for it.

"Skyguy?" he heard his future padawan ask and looked down to see her worried face peering up at him. "Did I make you cry? Did I say

something bad?"

Almost as if moving on their own, his arms reached out and pulled her to him and he buried his face in her shoulder.

"No, Ahsoka. You said just the *right* thing. I…" he couldn't think of anything to say. He had a vast vocabulary to draw from if he truly wanted to, but nothing seemed right, so he went back to the two words that came the closest and put every bit of meaning he could into them.

"Thank you."

She still sounded confused when she spoke again. "You're welcome," she said, patting his back. That just made him want to hug her tighter and he would deny a sob to his dying breath. Former Dark Lords of the Sith did not *sob*. Although the eleven-year-old son of Shmi Skywalker just might.

That humming laugh reached his ears and Master Yoda spoke. "Over eight-hundred years old, I am, and yet, always children, it is, who surprise me most."

An affirming hum from Girth as well. "Moments like this are why I became a child psychologist. Worth every moment."

Anakin took a few more seconds to compose himself before he sat back up, ready to continue the session.

Even his upcoming meeting with Palpatine couldn't dampen his spirits for once.

And it felt good.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thanks to Just Anne, Laura, Half_Baked_Bunny, Quathis, Khalthar and Carradee for this chapter. No, seriously. :D

Good news for some, bad news for others – this will likely be the last of the therapy chapters. I tried to skip it, I did… but it really didn't work. So for those of you who like them, you get a full-fledged one. For those of you who don't, well, sorry, it had to happen.

Next Chapter: We see consequences of worms, actions, changes in

general. Then come the FUN chapters. evil grin What? WHAT?!

Discord Link: https://discord.gg/EVUrHMd4za

Have a Merry Christmas, or whatever holiday you celebrate! <3

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin climbed the steps of the Jedi Temple in a bit of a daze. He'd just come back from the Senate and his most recent meeting with Palpatine. It had taken a good twenty minutes to get back to the Jedi temple and he *still* couldn't seem to wrap his head around what had just happened. A series of events that he just… couldn't seem to comprehend.

He passed the guards, walked through the large doors and into the main entrance hall, not really seeing any of it or the Jedi he passed by.

Someone calling his name brought him out of his mild trance and he looked around. Siri approaching him was not unwelcome, especially after his Senate duty. He was surprised she hadn't met him on the steps, as per usual, now that he thought about it. Then he noted the literal bounce in her step and sharp, ear-to-ear grin. She only smiled like that when…

It all clicked together in his head and he made a bee-line for her.

"So, how was the Senate today?" she asked in a cheerfully innocent tone.

She didn't fool Anakin for a second.

"What did you *do*?" he practically hissed, trying to keep his voice down so as not to be overheard. His tone may have still come across as incredulous and he may or may not have had more than a little awe in there too.

Somehow, her grin only widened.

"Got him that badly, huh?" she asked, not even bothering to continue the innocent act.

Anakin just stared at her as they walked side by side for several seconds before he could find his voice again. He hadn't been expecting her to *own* it. Not like that.

"Got him?" he finally repeated, still incredulous. "I don't remember ever having seen him that… *flustered* before! Not without him going into a full-on Sith Rage." He felt a vindictive grin begin to tug at the corners of his mouth. "That he hasn't snapped yet is a true testament to his self-control – ironic as it isn't a normal Sith trait. But… the *Bantha cub that Saved Life Day*?" He shook his head. "I swear I heard the theme song at least a dozen times and he only had enough time to smile and wave at me. *How* did you get that on his comm? And his back-up com? And his datapads? Even the one he bought this morning? I… Seriously, *how*?"

Siri paused in the fairly empty corridor they'd begun down, then looked around to make sure no one could hear them before grinning down at him. "I got Vos to make a worm specifically for him. Once it implanted into his data pad and he logged into *any* of his accounts, it infected everything tied to those accounts. He has the choice of losing all of his data or trying to deal with the worm and his new… theme song." She giggled. "It will change tomorrow. It's a new program on Coruscant television – *Sparkle Moon Princess* is the name, I believe. We have four or five songs along those lines that will cycle indefinitely.

"Oh, and we got quite a bit of information from him first. I'll be going through it for a while, but even if it isn't submissable in court, it gave us a good direction to go in to find something. Or at least it should."

His first thought went something along the lines of, *You would have made a good Sith*. That kind of creative torture… that could drive a person mad without ever hurting them at all. However, he also doubted she'd want to hear that. Besides, he doubted the sheer awe he felt at this move would be healthy to indulge in for long… and yet, how could he not utterly appreciate the sheer audacity and thought that must have gone into it?

"How was the worm delivered?" he asked.

"Stuck a miniature delivery bot onto one of the Senators. Remote activated when they got inside the office." It would have had to have been shut down when the Senator (he wondered which one) went into the office so it couldn't be detected by scanners. The solution was a little brilliant… and more than a little scary.

"So there is no way to trace it back to us?" he asked slowly.

She shook her head. "Sent to and from an account made and deleted specifically for that purpose, accessed literally across the world—"

"That's where you went the other day?" he asked.

She nodded as she continued, grin still splitting her face. "– From a public terminal with multiple encryption and misdirections through routers on a dozen random planets before it even came back here. Yes, Anakin, we're about as safe as we can get."

He shook his head, grin falling just a little. "That doesn't mean much with him."

He hated to put a damper on the mood, but it needed to be said.

She sighed. "I know. But we did take precautions."

Anakin nodded, still thinking back on the tight face of the Chancellor as the song broke out from his comm yet again. It was a memory he would cherish.

He did have one more question, though.

"You said Vos did this?"

Siri nodded. "On my request."

The younger time-traveler nodded, but paused as another thought came to him. "How much did you have to tell him?"

The other cleared her throat. "A lot. A…" she paused again and looked around, then lowered her voice, "A Sith in the senate, the Sith have returned, he's a high-placed Senator… etc. No time-travel, hardly mentioned you at all, so that's all still under wraps."

"Ah," Anakin said. That made sense. And yet, Vos had still come through. "Where is he?"

The taller blond shot him a calculating glance. "Why?"

"I would like to thank him as well."

The smile she sent him this time was smaller, but warmer for it. Like she approved of that answer, but then she shook her head. "He's gone."

Huh. Well, he supposed that he could understand that. Vos was a field Jedi from what he remembered. Likely a shadow. Still, her phrasing seemed a bit odd – terse. "Where?" he asked.

"He took his Padawan and is probably somewhere in the outer rim or

unknown regions by now."

They fell into silence for a couple of seconds, then Anakin snorted. "I'll have to reevaluate him, then. He never struck me as smart."

Siri scoffed. "That's because he didn't *want* you to see his smarts. Vos is one of the more self-aware Jedi I've ever met. He's also very intelligent and pragmatic. But, he isn't perfect by any means and he made some mistakes last time. Lost his memories…" she winced, "a couple of times, I think. I'll leave him a message. Maybe we can avoid it this time…"

Anakin grinned up at her because as dangerous as what she'd done potentially was, it was also brilliant.

"Have you found anything yet?"

Siri's face fell a little and she shook her head. "Not with an initial search. And I doubt he'd be reckless enough to leave anything seriously important on his Chancellor's desk, but I plan on going through it with a fine-toothed comb. Want to help?"

The idea of going through data did not appeal to him, but he'd done many things in his life that did not appeal to him, and if it helped them find evidence to put Sidious away…

"Tonight? During our normal practice time?" They could give up one day of training a week to find what they needed to. Although, he had third meal right now and would be missed if he skipped it.

Siri thought about that then nodded as she turned away from him at the junction of the hallway they'd just arrived at. "See you then," she called over her shoulder.

"Indeed," Anakin replied after her. He watched her for a moment, shaking his head fondly. He really should be upset that she'd potentially put them at risk… but after that look on Palpatine's face, he just couldn't be.

Still, as amusing as it had been, it meant they'd have to be even more vigilant and careful now. That didn't stop him from smiling all the way to the commissary.

xXx

Anakin had to admit, he hadn't felt this… *positive* in a very long time.

He felt light and airy, as if he'd (at least momentarily) escaped all of the pain and grief and horror and guilt that usually dragged him down. It would come back, he knew, but that he'd escaped it at all, even temporarily, was a minor miracle.

Funny, he hadn't thought he'd ever feel this good after seeing Palpatine. To be honest, He still felt like he was missing something, but either the lightness or the sheer support he'd received in the last few days had allowed him to see, for the first time, just how far he'd come. Part of the positivity, he supposed.

It boggled his mind, but he did his best to memorize the feeling and save it as a memory he could revisit when things grew difficult again – because he wasn't naive enough to think they wouldn't.

In a small daze he continued on his way towards the commissary.

"Ani!"

His name reverberating through the hall snapped him out of his reverie and he glanced behind him to see several familiar children approaching him. He couldn't help but smile at them. Even Coira was there, and his eyes widened when he saw the streaks of color in her hair – bright orange and blue. He knew that Master Xio had been resistant to Coira wanting to color her hair, but apparently the girl had talked her around to it. She flashed a huge smile at him as everyone hurried over.

"Did you hear the news?" Hik'te asked excitedly.

Anakin blinked. "What news?"

"They're getting rid of the age limit for Jedi Padawanship!" Darra said, bouncing with excitement.

The time-traveler felt his eyes widen. "Wait, what?" he asked.

She nodded excitedly. "And people can choose to go into one of the corps as early as nine now, if they want to!"

Anakin blinked at the red-head, then looked over at Maelee. He hadn't noticed, but she no longer wore only the light-colored initiate robes. Instead, she wore a blue tunic over her white pants and shirt. She smiled at him, one of the few truly genuine smiles he'd seen from her.

"Maelee's already chosen to go into the Education Corps and they

accepted her!" Hik'te said unnecessarily, grinning as he threw his arm around his best friend.

Anakin felt his mouth pull into his own genuine grin. "Congratulations," he said to her.

The girl's smile widened. "Thank you," she said softly.

"And – and guess what!" Hik'te continued.

Tru cut him off with a laugh. "Calm down, Hik'te," he said.

The other boy pouted a little. "I just want him to know! It's exciting!"

Anakin almost snorted at the gossip-in-training. The blue-skinned boy did love to share everything he learned. And Thoran liked to learn everything he could. Probably why the two of them got on so well.

"What is it?" the blond asked patiently, a fond smile lingering even now.

"If a Master gets approved by the Council, they can take on more than one student!"

That almost made Anakin's jaw drop as he looked around the rest of the group for confirmation. Many of them nodded.

He blinked. "Wow. That's…"

"Awesome, right! Now we'll have more Jedi Knights than ever!" Hik'te cheered.

"We'll be able to help more people," Hale spoke for the first time, his dark eyes dancing.

"And rumor is, there will likely be even *more* changes!" Thoran said, rubbing his hands. Anakin shook his head at the boy. Bothans and their information gathering tendencies.

"Oh!" the furry boy said as if he remembered something, "and we have more theories to run by you!"

Anakin blinked. Theories? It took him a minute to realize that the children meant theories about his origins and history. This should be amusing.

"Oh?" he asked, tone encouraging the bothan to continue on.

"Well, there is something I forgot to ask," the boy said, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. "Are you really human? I mean, I've heard of people out there who don't age but who look like humans. Are you one of them?"

Anakin raised an eyebrow at that, then wanted to snicker. "No, I am not one of them. As far as I know, I am completely human."

"Oh." Thoran deflated a little, but then he straightened in determination. "Well, you're really strong in the Force. Is it – everything you can do – a gift from the Force?"

The time-traveler frowned. That seemed a little vague to him, but he saw no reason to lie to them. "In the broadest terms, you could say so, yes."

The bothan's eyes lit up and his pointed ears twitched in excitement. "Then are you a manifestation of the Force?"

"Hey," Tru cut in, "that was my theory."

Anakin blinked, then truly pondered that. He didn't have a father, as far as he knew. He was supposed to be *some* sort of will of the Force in sapient form… but then, he was still completely human according to his DNA.

He needed clarification.

"What do you mean, by 'manifestation of the Force'?" he asked.

This time, Tru turned to him, silver skin glinting in the light as he grinned. "You know, like the Force made manifest – like you are what the Force would be if they were a sentient being!"

"Sapient," Anakin corrected him. "Animals that can learn and be taught are sentient; those with higher brain functions are sapient. And no, I am not the Force made manifest." And he didn't have to explain the whole 'chosen one' thing. Definitely a positive.

Tru deflated too, looking disappointed.

Then, to his surprise, Coira spoke up. "I came up with the idea that you astral projected to another universe and spent decades studying and meditating in the form of a spirit – so your spirit is thousands of years older than your body."

Anakin wasn't the only one who just stared at her. She stood on the edge of the group and, when she saw everyone else had turned their attention on her, she sniffed and turned her head away from them haughtily. With the eye not visible to the rest of the group, she winked at Anakin.

"What?" was all she said.

She'd made that up to cover for him.

'Thank you,' he mouthed to her before the rest of the group turned back to him, most shaking their heads. She just smiled widely at him.

"Hale's idea is that you're the reincarnation of an ancient Jedi," Hik'te went on, energy completely back to where it had been before Coira had spoken.

Anakin actually snorted at that. "Not to my knowledge."

Instead of seeing the typical let down expressed by the kids, they just seemed to get more excited. "But you *could* be," Darra insisted excitedly.

"Or," Coira spoke again, "he could be possessed by the ancient spirit of a Jedi who has passed him all of their knowledge, but not necessarily their actual memories."

Everyone stared at her again, although some of them looked thoughtful this time at least.

"*What*?" the light-haired girl asked in exasperation. "It's better than my third idea."

By this point, Anakin was finding it very difficult to not burst out laughing. "Your third idea?"

Coira nodded. "I come from Coruscant, but when I became a padawan, I could look up my family if my master allowed it. Master Xio thought it was a good idea. It turns out that my parents came from a world called Troinsh in the outer rim. They believe in local spirits called Konii taking on the forms of children to play with them when their guardians aren't around. When the children need protection, the Konii take the form of a terrifying monster and protect the children from whatever danger threatens them."

More staring.

Well, Anakin thought, *she's not wrong about the monster part…* It was nice to think that and not feel the normal pain and guilt that accompanied it. He doubted that would happen again.

"I like that one," Maelee said with a firm nod.

"Hey!" Hik'te spoke up, looking at his best friend, betrayed. "Anakin's not a monster!"

Coira shrugged. "I think anyone can be a monster if they're pushed too far," she said, then looked over at Anakin, expression understanding. "He's just… *our* monster. And we wouldn't want him any other way."

Anakin appreciated that.

"You're kind to say that, even if you don't know everything," he said to her, both as a reminder and as an acknowledgment of the acceptance (that he *still* didn't deserve – what was wrong with these children?).

Coira opened her mouth, then closed it. "I… suppose I don't. But… Anakin what you were doesn't matter. It never has. What you are? That's what we care about. Right guys?"

The others looked confused, and back and forth between them for a moment. "Um… yeah, I guess," Hik'te finally said. "You're awesome, Ani."

The rest of them nodded emphatically.

"I still don't think you're a monster though," the blue-boy said with another pout.

Anakin could have lied, but he hadn't wanted to outright lie for a long while, and he didn't want to start back up again now.

"I am…" he said softly, then he looked over at Coira, who had bitten her lip in worry, probably wondering if she'd pushed too far. "Or, I was. But… if that's something I have to be to protect you all now… then," maybe… just maybe, "I think I can live with that."

Coira's worry evaporated and she grinned at him. "Just, don't go too far, and you'll be fine."

Anakin nodded firmly. "Never again."

The other girl's grin widened. "Good. We'll hold you to that."

Then she turned to the rest of her friends. "Well, weren't we heading to dinner?" With that, she turned and began to trot down the hallway, a visible bounce in her step.

Anakin and Maelee exchanged fond glances before they began to head after her. Behind them, Anakin heard the other kids fall into line, whispering loudly enough for him to hear.

"What did she mean, 'what you were'?" someone asked.

"She knows something," Thoran whispered suspiciously. "Either he told her or she figured something out… or maybe Maelee figured something out and she told Coira?"

"Then why didn't she tell me?" Hik'te asked, a little hurt.

"Why does he think he's a monster?" someone interrupted, keeping them on task.

A girl, Darra then seeing as the others were either with or ahead of Anakin, answered. "She said he shouldn't go 'too far'."

"What is 'too far'?" the other whisperer – likely Tru – asked back. "And he said never *again*… Did that mean he's gone too far once?"

Well, it seemed he'd let a little more than he'd intended slip again. Part of him still couldn't allow himself to feel down about it, though. He was determined to keep his good mood until the end of the day at least.

Although, for the millionth time, he wished he had an adult brain that didn't allow his mouth to go racing off on its own.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thanks to Anne-athema Codex, Laura, Half_Baked_Bunny and Khalthar for this chapter, and Carradee and Quathis for beta reading. Seriously, my discord community really helped with this chapter. I know I don't always ask for help, but knowing I can come to fans and ask for their opinion has been a big relief to me. LOL

Apparently my word program doesn't like the word 'positivity', but it fits in this instance.

I did not come up with The Bantha That Saved Life Day, I got that from a series of one-shots and absolutely loved it. So yeah, no claim by me... The one-shots were on AO3, in second person (strange, but they made it work)... But I couldn't find it. If someone knows what I'm talking about, please let me know so I can credit them here.

So, we're going to be getting a couple more of chapters like this (I'm thinking 2? maybe 3?) before... well... Before. ;) So yeah, some more prep and then hopefully some action. :D

For those of you who don't want to go to Discord, I have a forum going up here on ffnet if you'd like to visit it. Trying to see if there's any interest. www.fanfiction.net/forum/Obi-s-Gaming/231366/ It's named for gaming right now, but that could change depending on what people want to talk about. Please check it out. :D Thanks!

For those of you who DO like discord: discord.gg/8tJXPY8j

Thank you for reading!

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin bid Master Yaddle farewell as they parted ways. She hadn't stopped trying to help him commune with and immerse himself in the Force again, and he'd been making leaps and bounds of progress, especially with the recent streak of positivity in his life.

He couldn't help the itch at the back of his mind that poked and prodded at him, telling him that (despite everyone's assurances) he *still* didn't deserve it and it would all be taken from him. However, since he couldn't do anything about that, he tried to listen to Master Xio and Girth's advice, encouraging him to enjoy the feeling while he could. He just hadn't expected it to last this long.

Still, if it helped, he'd welcome it. He'd actually achieved a rather deep trance and felt he could begin to use some of the more advanced abilities he'd learned (like battle meditation) again. There were likely other Force powers he could look into that could help him when he confronted Palpatine, but for now he just wanted to continue to deepen his connection to the Force.

This time, he wouldn't rush it. He wanted to do it right.

And Master Yaddle could only speak good things about his progress. He was acing his Force Techniques class (finally) and… well, the only downside to everything was waiting for the other shoe to drop. The longer it didn't, the more dread he conjured. Even now, he found it difficult to resign himself to the fact that he would simply have to face it when it came. It was a work in progress.

As he walked down the hallway towards the commissary for the final meal of the day, he took out his comm unit and checked for any messages he'd missed. He found one from Siri telling him to be at landing bay two at 1800 hours. Frowning, he checked his chrono. If he headed there now, he'd be a little early, but he may as well. He could eat afterwards, he was sure. Besides, he'd promised Siri that he'd help her go through more data tonight, so maybe she had plans? Perhaps she'd ordered from Dex's or something.

He couldn't believe he'd thought to merely give up one day a week to

go through the information. It would take years to sort through everything the worm had managed to get for them if they did it that slowly. They couldn't *afford* to do it that slowly.

Shrugging, he turned on his heel and began walking back towards the landing bay. It took him almost fifteen minutes to get there, but he counted it as good time for someone who wasn't hurrying. To his surprise, he found a shuttle there being prepped for take-off. Obi-wan and another Jedi were loading the supplies for what looked like a fairly long trip while an amused (very fond) Siri spoke with Ferus, who was grinning up at her.

Then the boy turned and saw Anakin. For a moment, he froze, then squared his shoulders, said something to Siri, who nodded, and walked over to meet Anakin.

"Hey," he said awkwardly.

"Hi," Anakin said back. Then they stood there in an uncomfortable quiet for several seconds before Ferus seemed to mentally talk himself into something. Then he brought his hand up and held it out.

"Look, I… I know I've said thanks, but I want to say it again: Thank you for helping me out before."

"No problem," Anakin returned quickly. "I am pleased that I could help. I… have had problems with that in the past."

What an understatement.

"With helping people?" Ferus clarified, confused.

Anakin felt a sardonic smile come to his lips. "Yes."

The dark-haired boy (with that unusual streak – Anakin hadn't realized it was natural before) looked puzzled for a moment, but then he shrugged. "Then you deserve my thanks all the more."

The time-traveler blinked. How had he come to that conclusion?

"In any case," the boy went on, "I… would like to be friends."

Well, if that wasn't the most blunt, awkward statement ever. Still, it brought a smile to Anakin's lips. The Ferus he remembered had always been so confident – to a point of arrogance, not that the former Sith had any room to judge – aloof and focused. He hadn't realized the

other boy just… didn't seem to be good with interactions at this age. Anakin could relate.

Still, Anakin couldn't just accept things as they stood. He had to warn the boy first.

"Being friends with me… is not easy. It's… more dangerous than you realize." He narrowed his eyes a little, trying to get the boy to understand. Then he softened his expression. "But if you can accept that then… I think I'd like that."

With that, he took the other boy's hand and shook it. Ferus looked surprised, then suspicious (now *that* was the Ferus Anakin remembered), but then he nodded.

"Ferus," Obi-wan's voice drew the two boys' attention. "I'd like you to go over the pre-flight check with Master Torun." The older Jedi who had been helping Obi-wan load the starfighter waved at them cheerfully.

Ferus looked between Obi-wan and Anakin a couple of times before nodding.

"I'll see you when I get back," he said to the initiate.

"I'll hold you to that," Anakin replied with a smile. Well, it seemed his initial goal of gaining allies at the Jedi Temple was coming along nicely. Now if only he could keep them… and keep them alive.

"Anakin," Obi-wan said, looking nervous (well, for Obi-wan), "do you mind if we talk for a moment?"

The initiate blinked and nodded, glancing at Siri who stood with her arms folded and a smug expression on her face. She hadn't moved from her spot.

"You see, I have been speaking with Knight Tachi and… well, you know that the Council has recently granted permission for certain knights to take on two padawans, correct?"

Anakin's breath caught in his throat for a moment.

What?!

Wait… was Obi-wan saying…

No, he couldn't be…

Could he?

"Well, I want to extend a formal invitation to train you beside Ferus as my padawan, if you would like."

Anakin just stared at him.

His mind couldn't seem to actually take that in – like the words couldn't compute.

"You don't have to answer right now. I'm sure there will be many masters putting their offers forward but… I've had a connection with you since I first saw you, and you helped Ferus so much I'm sure you'd get along. Honestly, if I hadn't taken Ferus, I would have still liked to ask you. I truly thought you and Siri would… well, even if you still decide to go with her – or with the corps, if you so wish – I wanted you to know that I would be honored to teach you, as young and inexperienced as I am."

It almost felt as if his brain had shut down and was still rebooting. He struggled to voice any thoughts. "I… you… You want me? To be your padawan?"

Obi-wan nodded. "Indeed I do. Very much so. I cannot help but foresee you becoming a great Jedi – no matter who you study under, but being with you on that journey and seeing you to that end feels… *right*. Well, to me anyway. Ferus approves as well, but in the end, it is up to you and you have to do what is best for yourself."

Tentatively, he reached out and put an arm on Anakin's shoulder. "Think about it. Once Ferus and I return from this training trip – one far better planned out than our previous one, I assure you – we would love to schedule time to get to know you better. If you would be alright with that."

He seemed so… unsure. And yet, Anakin could tell it was more about not crossing boundaries than it was about his decision to ask Anakin to be his padawan.

Again.

He didn't know what to feel about this.

"I… will think about it," he finally said. Then, because the offer had allayed so many of his fears, he added on: "Thank you, Obi-wan."

The older Jedi just grinned at him, patted him on the head, then turned and headed towards the ship.

"Is the check finished?" he asked.

"Yes," Ferus nodded, stoic as ever.

"Then I suppose we should be off." With that, he led the other two into the ship, waving one last time at Anakin and Siri as the former came to stand beside the latter.

Ferus also waved and the other Master simply looked amused.

"Well?" Siri asked.

"Did you put him up to that?" Anakin asked, frowning.

The taller blond shook her head, still looking all too pleased. "No. He actually approached me and asked if I would be offended if he were to ask you."

A churning in his gut that he hadn't even realized was there dissipated and Anakin relaxed a little. "Oh."

She chuckled lowly and backed away as the ship's ramp lifted. Anakin followed her. "I'm guessing you need some time to process this?" she said wryly.

"Am I that obvious?"

She shrugged. "And I have a connection to you."

Right.

He nodded because yes, he did need time to think about it.

"Would you like to speak tonight? Or would you prefer tomorrow when we train in the salles?"

"I will… let you know," he finally said.

She nodded and then turned her attention back to the ship as it lifted off.

"He… he said he and Ferus both want it…" Anakin heard himself say. Maybe he did want to speak more at the moment after all.

Siri snorted. "I think Ferus has a crush on you."

It took Anakin a minute to wrap his head around that. "What?!" he asked.

She shrugged. "You heard me."

"But… I… I mean…" he felt as if the rug had been pulled out from under him and then the world turned upside down. Although, now that he thought about it, considering their 'rivalry' in his past life, that did make some sense. Still… the idea of stoic, focused Ferus having a crush on *him*…

"I… suppose I should let him down gently then," because Anakin was pretty straight as far as he knew. That and he was also rather determined to avoid romantic relationships this time around, period.

Siri nodded. "The sooner the better."

"Is… is that why he is okay with…" why was he having such a hard time stringing words together? It wouldn't be the first time he felt at a loss and more like his physical age than anything else.

His companion snorted as she turned to walk towards the exit. "Ferus wouldn't let that get in the way of his goals once he figures it out. And he certainly wouldn't let it get in the way of anyone else's education."

Anakin could see that from Ferus, he supposed.

Finally, he shook his head. "I believe I will go and get third meal and then go to bed early."

"Weren't you going to go through the data with me?" she asked, frowning for the first time that conversation.

Ah, yes… he had.

No rest for the wicked, he supposed.

Still, he hesitated. He really wanted to either meditate on Obi-wan's offer or sleep on it. Girth and Master Xio had insisted that he take care of himself as best he could. He had a child's body. Pushing it could cause permanent damage. He'd lived with permanent damage and would prefer to avoid such this time around. He hadn't been the best at consistent meals and sleep since he'd come back, but he'd *tried*. Was still trying.

Kriff Yoda's saying.

Finally, Siri sighed. "Take a nap. Or meditate. I expect to see you at my door and ready to work at 2100 hours."

If Anakin rushed through his meal, then that could give him a good two hours of sleep or meditation (whichever actually came). Although the idea of skipping out on working when they *needed* to find that proof…

"I won't even be available until about then anyway. Other matters to attend to," Siri said casually.

Anakin doubted it, but he still appreciated her discretion.

Finally, he nodded firmly, once, and turned to walk away.

"See you tonight," he said over his shoulder.

"See you," she returned.

xXx

Anakin yawned, having set his resolution to get more sleep aside (or tossed it straight into Coruscant traffic) and stayed up to go over Palpatine's information until very early in the morning. He was thankful he'd taken the advice to get a nap in, because they had made a lot of progress. Both he and Siri had found multiple points where information didn't match up. Nothing concrete, of course, but she was right that it had been a good place to start. He'd managed to get a couple more hours of sleep before getting up this morning, but knew he was in for a long day. How was it that this body could have so much energy, but required so much sleep? He didn't remember feeling like this as a teenager, or young adult. Maybe children had so much energy simply because they required so much sleep?

Shaking his head, he reached out to the Force and drew on that to help keep him up and alert. It wasn't healthy to do constantly, but it was better than nothing. Besides, he'd had enough sleepless nights, even as a child, that this wouldn't be anything he couldn't deal with. Didn't mean he was looking forward to long, boring classes about things he already knew. Today was their Force Techniques class, though, and while Anakin used to dread it, he found himself looking forward to it now. It wasn't uncommon to have a time of meditation, and he could use that right now.

He lagged behind the rest of his initiate group as they chattered. Just before they reached the classroom, Coira joined them and they all entered together. Immediately, they noticed something different. There was a woman at the head of the classroom standing next to Master Kleon. She had the presence of a Jedi Master, but she looked… rough. Not necessarily in a bad way. Honestly, she kind of reminded Anakin of his mother – someone who led a hard life but took every pleasure they could out of it anyway. Her brown and gray-streaked hair had been pinned back and she wore gray and green robes similar to Jedi robes. In front of her, on Master Kleon's desk, she had small pots full of a dark dirt.

Anakin heard the other children in his class begin to whisper to each other, wondering what was going on. He frowned as he had no clue himself.

Well, at least there was a chance it would be less boring than usual.

"Alright, class, settle down," Master Kleon said, his three eyes swiveling to all corners of the room to make sure everyone had their attention on him. Once they had settled, he smiled and gestured to the woman next to him.

"This is Jedi Tentia Carom, a member of Agri-corps." More whispering broke out and Master Kleon held up his hands. Anakin noticed that he didn't call the woman 'Master' or 'Knight' and wondered why they didn't have a title such as 'healer' in the Medi-corps. "I know, I know. We've all heard about the changes being made regarding the corps and the age limits. Because of that, the Council has decided that it would be wise to have each of the corps come in and explain what they do and how. Jedi Carom is here today to show us a little about how the Jedi Agri-corps works." He smiled again, then stepped aside, nodding to her.

"Thank you, Master Kleon," she said with a smile. Then she turned and raised her hand. To Anakin's (and the rest of the children's) surprise, the pots lifted into the air and floated, *simultaneously* over to each desk and set down calmly. Anakin just stared at the pot in front of him for several seconds. The kind of control that must take… and she'd made it seem *effortless*…

He wasn't the only one impressed.

"The Agri-corps are a Jedi sub-group – although that may change soon," and she looked positively giddy when she said that. Her Force-

presence spiked as well. She did not strike him as any type of Jedi he'd ever met at all. "In any case, we are called into drastic situations. When worlds have been over-mined, bombarded, ravaged by solar storms, or even planetary storms, struck by comets and asteroids, and those are just the situations I can think of off the top of my head – they call us in. Initially, we bring food from our hub planet that you use specifically for growing crops, Taanab, but mainly our job, once the planet has been deemed relatively safe, is to bring life back to dying worlds."

She still had one pot in front of her, significantly larger than theirs. Taking a deep breath, she reached her hands into the dirt and closed her eyes. Nothing happened that anyone could see, but Anakin could feel her focusing all of her intent and control on the pot. No one in the class seemed to breathe as they could also, apparently, sense her not insignificant presence. It felt so… unrestrained. Anakin didn't know how she could be so in control and so seemingly *free* all at once.

It took several minutes, but the Force kept spiking until the dirt *moved*… and then, a small stalk of green poked itself through the topsoil and began to stretch towards the light. Jedi Carom didn't stop.

As if in time-lapse, the plant continued to grow larger and larger until it looked as if it had been growing for several weeks – in a matter of minutes. Anakin knew his mouth was hanging open and he doubted he was the only one. Some children didn't seem so impressed, but he *was*. The *implications*…

If he'd known something like this was even *possible*…

The image of a very green Tatooine burst through his mind for a moment, so quickly he wasn't quite sure if his own brain had conjured it up, or if the Force had sent him an image of what *could* have been.

It took her almost fifteen minutes to get the plant to the point where a single flower bud opened. Only then did she stop, step back and smile down at her handiwork. Then she looked up at the class, beaming.

"I have planted a seed in each of the pots in front of you. Normally there would be a process of going through and purifying the soil, soaking the land in the Living Force, making sure there are enough nutrients for the plant to grow as it needs to, etc. However, I have done all of the preparation work for you, so you may try this yourself.

"Now," she cut off some of the excited chatter that had started. "What I just did was something that took me *years* to accomplish, so if anyone

gets so much as a hint of green poking through the surface, I will be very pleasantly surprised. However, if you take this pot with you and do as I will soon show you every day, you may have something by the end of the week."

Anakin looked back at the pot. This was something he'd never even heard of, let alone tried. And yet…

"Now the first thing you need to do is reach out to the Force. Then feel through it to the pot in front of you." She stopped, waiting for everyone to get onto the same page, apparently. Anakin closed his eyes and sensed through the Force for the soil and the seed inside. He certainly did feel Jedi Carom's signature there. He studied it in the Force, channeling his excitement at learning a new technique – an entirely new *branch* of Force techniques – to maintain his connection.

"Good," he heard her say. "Now the Force is like water running down a hill. You give it direction, and it takes the best path to accomplish that goal. However, you can't just sense a seed and think 'grow' and expect something to happen. You must go inside of the seed, feel all of its parts, and then – very patiently – feed it the nutrients it needs. You cannot force it, or you will kill the seed. You must be slow and patient.

"Farm work, even farm work with the Force, requires a lot of long hours of patient focus and control. It is not easy; however, it is incredibly rewarding."

Anakin had little doubt. He put his hands into the moist soil and searched for the nutrients that the seed would require. The Force told him what was needed for the task and so he cautiously took those elements and nudged them towards the seed.

He sensed Jedi Carom walking around the room, focusing on one child at a time and falling into a light trance to guide them along. Anakin ignored her and the others around him to simply focus on his seed.

Eventually, the Agri-corps member reached his spot and he felt her presence join his.

"You are doing very well," she said, sounding impressed. "You aren't rushing or pushing, merely helping it along and that is exactly what needs to be done. The positive emotion helps."

Anakin could swear the world came to a complete stop and he was wrenched out of his trance in shock. "Wait… you use positive emotion

to focus the Force?"

Jedi Carom looked a little startled and confused. "During this particular process? Yes. Other processes don't require it, but positivity goes a long way to help plants – anything living, really – grow."

He stared at her for several seconds before looking back at the pot in front of him. "Oh."

She seemed to be at about as much of a loss of words as he was.

"Would you like me to help you get back into a trance?" she finally asked.

He shook his head. "I can manage, thank you. Others need your help more than I."

She didn't look too sure about that but she did nod and stand. "Very well," she said slowly. "I will come back to check on your progress, though. I can already sense your seed sprouting. Keep it up."

With that, she left to help the next student. Anakin continued to stare at his pot for several seconds before he released his surprise and, well, everything else to the Force and searched for that excitement he'd had earlier. It was difficult, but eventually he caught hold of it and breathed out, using the emotion as a focal point to find the seedling again.

He didn't know how much longer they sat there, trying to make plants grow. Anakin could even feel Master Kleon doing his own exercise with a pot and seed. Anakin approved. He'd always seen Jedi as the heroes of legend – the fighters and warriors that protected the universe. But this… he could imagine a universe with planets filled to the brim with greenery on every habitable planet. No more desert planets or waste planets. The sheer potential for growth… they could feed so many people.

By becoming a Jedi, Anakin may very well have missed his calling. He wished he'd known more about the Agri-corps before…

So caught up in the vision, he hadn't realized that he'd bypassed the soil altogether, feeding the plant nutrients directly from the Force. It needed to be stabilized, so he used the Force to make it stronger.

"Anakin!"

He opened his eyes, blinking at Jedi Carom in front of him, and then at the sprouting seedling in the pot. His jaw dropped… as did hers.

But then she sighed and cleared her throat. "Class, I'd like to draw your attention to something." She said, patting Anakin's hand as if in reassurance. "Anakin, here, has done something that every Agri-corp member has done at some point in their lives. Instead of using the nutrients in the soil to grow the plant, he fed it directly with the Force. I'm sure you all know that the Force is very helpful when one is hungry or tired to keep us operating at peak performance. The problem is, without a direct connection to the Force, any plant grown with it will begin to die the moment their source to the Force is cut off."

Anakin's breath caught in his throat and he looked down at the plant. Just another thing to add onto his life of good intentions with terrible results. It wasn't something that he could truly bring himself to feel badly about, but it was disappointing and… frustrating. He'd literally poured himself into the seed, and it would die because of it.

"However, that is definitely a mistake only senior apprentices and journeymen have the knowledge, training and skill to use. You doing this is extremely impressive, Anakin, and… we can actually fix it. If you will allow me to guide you." She knelt in front of him, kind gray eyes on him and a warm smile. "Will you let me guide you in the Force?"

That brought a bout of anxiety he had not wanted to deal with. The only person he really trusted him to guide him in the Force was Yaddle, Yoda, Siri and maybe Obi-wan. He hadn't… he didn't…

Except wasn't it about time that he learn to trust again?

He wanted to.

He could do this.

He could.

Steeling himself, he took a deep breath, then looked up at the master and nodded. Her smile widened.

"Do you mind if I invite the class?"

Anakin blinked, head tipping in confusion.

"This is a Force-techniques class, and one thing the Jedi in the Agri-corps do on a regular basis is group meditation. I would like to attempt that with the rest of the children here. But only if you're okay with that."

Anakin took another breath and really considered the thought. He had his allies… his *friends* who he trusted, but there were several other children who he barely knew.

But this wasn't much more of a step beyond that… and he knew them… and they were children. What harm could they do?

Well, quite a lot… but he was honestly more worried about doing more harm to them than the other way around.

Still… he felt that if he backed down now, it would be more cowardly than anything…

So he swallowed, closed his eyes and nodded before opening his eyes and meeting her gaze.

She looked skeptical.

"Are you sure?" she asked carefully.

A year ago, he would have been offended at her handling him with kid gloves. Now, though, he couldn't help but be grateful at her consideration. He looked around at all of the pairs (and sometimes more) of eyes staring at him. Then he looked down at the plant that had already begun to wither. He hadn't cut it off from the Force yet, but he definitely hadn't concentrated on it either.

He nodded again.

"Yes."

Her eyes squinted shut as she grinned at him and then stood.

"Alright, children, begin your trances. Focus on your own seeds for now, and we will approach you in the Force to join us. If you are not comfortable with it, you can let us know. There is no harm or shame in this. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Jedi Tentia," the class said before settling down. Anakin felt the Force around him calm again as the children prepared to meditate. Then the Agri-corps Jedi stood and gestured. A chair from the front of

the class came soaring towards her. Anakin blinked. It was such a blatantly frivolous use of the Force, but she didn't even seem to register that.

Interesting.

"Now, Anakin, I assume you know how to start a trance and search out a presence, correct?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "Excellent. Go ahead as you normally would. Then find me and I will guide you into remedying this mishap."

He returned the gesture and settled down, closing his eyes and reaching for the Force, using the warmth of Obi-wan's acceptance to do so. A couple of seconds later, he reached tentatively out for Jedi Tentia. She seemed a little surprised, but not displeased when she reached back. He wasn't entirely sure why, but didn't focus on that as they reached for the plant together.

Then, while part of her focus was on the plant and Anakin, part of her seemed to break off and search out one of the nearer classmates – Hik'te, actually.

Focus on me, please, came the Jedi's soft reprimand. *The ability to split my attention in the Force like this is a high-level technique that few can learn, and rarely outside of the Agri-corps.*

That would be… useful.

Anakin pushed that thought aside and did as he was asked, focusing on the plant in front of him.

To save the plant, we will need to bring in the nutrients and then slowly withdraw the Force altogether. Like this.

To Anakin's amazement, he felt her sift through the soil, as if sorting it and breaking it down, taking what was needed – and only what was needed – before moving them gently into the plant and then drawing just a minuscule amount of the Force out of said plant.

Hik'te had joined them at this point, as had Maelee and one child Anakin didn't know named Yulla. All of them had the equivalent of a jaw-dropped expression, except in the Force. Anakin hadn't realized he'd been missing so many nutrients…

One thing about the Agri-corps, she said inside their minds – seriously, *all* of their minds… *how*?! More children joined and she continued on. *We have to study the chemical and biological makeup of the plants in the region we are working on. If anyone is interested in studying the living sciences…*

She let the thought hang, enticing. Then she moved on.

Because I know the exact chemical makeup of the plant we're working on, I know what to look for in the soil beyond simply 'beneficial' to said plants, which is the basis for growing seeds. So, one has to have the knowledge of a biologist, and then the control of a Jedi Master to find each one of those substances.

Then she practically paraded the different *elements* in front of the children, and Anakin began to sense each separate one, although he could not identify a single one.

Each of these are what this plant needs to survive – to thrive. Can you feel the differences?

Anakin nodded and felt each child – as well as Master Kleon, who seemed just as awed, if a little reserved and wary – do the same.

Can you all help me find these elements? She asked. *Even if you cannot actually access them, feel through the soil for them. Let me know when you find them.*

And then they all reached for Anakin's pot. Almost immediately, he was able to sense the miniature grains that matched what he'd been shown in the Force. He did not have the control to get to all of it. He didn't even have the control to get to most of it, so he simply took whatever he found to Jedi Tentia, who was using her trick to focus on multiple children at once. She would take what they brought to her, separate it into the different clumps of elements she needed, and then she would slowly, gently move the nutrients into the plant.

It was working. Anakin could feel it becoming stronger. She knew exactly how to feed the nutrients into the plant, where it had an excess or deficiency, and how to keep the plant alive with the Force while slowly withdrawing the combined presences and support of the entire class.

Plants, she went on, *like most of us, are a part of the living Force. Withdrawing it entirely will kill it as surely as withdrawing all support right now would. But we, like the Force, are often like this plant. We grow up*

dependent on something – sometimes, even the Force. Then we have to be patient and take it slowly, heal with small steps while thoroughly examining every part of us. In a sapient being, this process I am showing you can be painful and dangerous if done incorrectly. But it can also save a life. The Agri-corps and the Medi-corps aren't all that different, when one comes down to it.

All of them wanted to save the plant, and after a while that process and determination began to blend together. Sometimes, Anakin couldn't tell where he stopped and someone else began… but it wasn't unpleasant. It only fueled his own determination. And when one of the children made a connection or discovery, it seemed to pass easily to the others, like a chain of blocks toppling down. It was… certainly a unique experience. One he'd never really experienced before. Was this because of Jedi Tentia? She was certainly a factor…

And there. She finally sent to them, then took a metaphysical step back, admiring all of their handy work. Anakin turned his attention on the plant. He could still feel it through the Force, but not like he could when his own presence had been keeping it alive. Now it seemed strong, growing on its own, and he had no doubt that it would be fine if they all withdrew.

Let us return to the classroom, shall we? The Agri-corps Jedi sent to them and then gently pulled away, encouraging each of them to do so as well.

Slowly, Anakin disconnected himself from the others. It felt… strange, to say the least. Strange because part of him felt extreme relief at being himself again, but part of him missed the input – the warmth, curiosity and innocence – of the others.

When he opened his eyes. He realized he was holding hands. Looking to the side, he saw Coira on one side and Hik'te on the other. Behind him, Hale had a hand on his back… and they weren't the only ones. Some children had turned to either side so they could reach others' hands in a series of chains around the room.

They all looked down at their hands, surprised.

"Very well done for your first group healing meditation," Jedi Tentia said happily as she rose to her feet, the chair she'd been sitting on rising behind her and following after her.

Anakin stared after her in a bit of a daze.

That had been so… so…

No, he didn't have words for it.

Incredible? Awe-inspiring? Unlike anything the dark side could ever offer in its wildest dreams? All of that and more somehow.

He heard a gasp from Coira and turned to see what had caught her attention. She was staring at his desk and the pot on it. Blinking, Anakin turned to look at it and found a fully-grown plant, full of leaves and flowers and multiple stems.

"That, children, is what comes of learning to completely and utterly immerse yourself in the Force. I know you are taught the basics here, but Jedi Knights and Masters have different goals when it comes to the Force; learning how to attack and defend, understanding the mind-set of the people around you, sensing and preventing ill intent. The Agri-corps Jedi use their ability to feed, grow, and understand the Galaxy around us on a far more fundamental level, and that can require far more dedication than one realizes."

The class stared at her silently for several seconds before she grinned.

"So, with that being said, we would *love* to have any one of you – or all of you – join us. If this is something that interests you, let Master Kleon know and we'll discuss what will be best for you."

With that, she turned her grin on the Gran who usually taught their class.

"I'll turn it back over to you."

Well, Anakin had been right – it had been *enlightening*.

Chapter End Notes

AN: First, I'd like to thank Quathis, Khalthar and Carradee, as usual, for their help with this chapter.

I admit that I based a lot of the Agri-corps here off of Lost Reflection by esama. Phenomenal story, even if it isn't finished. Her world building is jaw-dropping imo. So yeah, tried to expand on that a bit, but I highly recommend taking a look at the story. :)

I'd also like to thank input from my discord community! You guys are amazing! For anyone who would like to join: discord.gg/

YJhnnkn6hG

I know this is on the late side of when I usually get it up, but it is what it is. There were reasons. I'm too tired to go into them. lol

Thank you for reading!

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin wasn't the only one who left that Force Techniques class in a daze. Just remembering how *unrestrained* Jedi Tentia had been throughout the entire class, in her emotions, in her use of the Force… she was still a Jedi, and yet so unlike any Jedi Anakin had ever met. Somehow, he doubted she'd ever hurt a fly, even to defend herself, and yet she had a presence that rivaled council members.

Incorporating the Agri-corps more firmly into the Jedi could only be a good thing in Anakin's eyes. The Order definitely needed more of… well… that.

"Guys," a voice drew Anakin from his thoughts and he looked ahead to see Hik'te had stopped and was now staring off into space. "I… I think I need to…" he turned his gaze down to the pot of soil in his hands. "This is what I want to do."

The time-traveler felt his eyebrows rise for a moment. That was… both surprising and not. He was about to open his mouth when the last person he'd ever thought spoke up.

"Me too, actually."

Anakin could only stare at the boy with silver-tinged skin, mouth slightly agape. Tru had made a great Jedi. He'd be taken as a padawan in the near future if things went remotely similar to his old timeline… and here he was… just… *what*?

It took Anakin a moment before he swallowed and voiced his opinion. "Are… you sure?" the boys looked at him, a little awed and a little troubled.

"I… I don't," Hik'te started, looking up at Anakin and then back at his potted plant. "It feels right…"

Tru just looked thoughtful. "I thought I was supposed to be a knight. I really did. But seeing this… I don't…" He frowned. "I mean I still want to, but this… this interests me more. I… I want this."

"But is it what the Force wants?" Darra asked cautiously.

Tru thought about that, lips thinned in thought. "I… think so."

A twinge in the Force had Anakin looking more closely at his classmates and… it just *shifted*. Even though nothing changed visibly and the children didn't seem any the wiser, Anakin was sure he'd felt it – a change in the Force. Centered around Tru who was supposed to be a Jedi Knight, but who now might not be…

Was that… a shatterpoint?

Or just an obvious difference in the Force?

Was that what Mace saw or felt every time he came across one of those? Because if he did, that… actually explained a lot.

"Why don't you two meditate on it tonight, then?" Darra suggested, drawing Anakin back to the others' conversation.

Both boys seemed to like that suggestion, looking at her in relief.

"We have the class again in two days. Maybe we can ask Master Kleon for some help?"

"Maybe," Hik'te said while Tru just nodded a little absently.

With that, the children made their way in relative quiet to their next class as they pondered the new changes in the Jedi Order.

xXx

".. And then she pulled us all into *a group meditation*! Not where everyone meditates and then feels for the others and learns deeper connections, but where *everyone* was *literally* in the same meditation…" Anakin paused, then frowned. "That… doesn't actually explain it correctly…" Odd. Normally his vocabulary did not fail him.

Across from him, on the training-salle bench they'd been resting on, Siri raised her water container to her mouth and took a sip. Anakin could swear he saw a grin on her lips, but it was gone when he could see her whole face again so he dismissed it.

"I've never felt anything like that before, Siri," he said. "Not as a Jedi and especially not as a Sith. It was…" and he couldn't finish adequately *again*. This was getting ridiculous. So he jumped to voicing the implications instead. "Imagine the kind of learning a group led like that could *do*! I mean the sheer *possibilities*…"

"There's a reason we don't practice it here in the Temple," Siri said, drawing Anakin's attention again. "The more conflict there is between people, the harder it is to establish a connection like that. It can also cause identity problems and dependency issues."

Anakin simply blinked at her, incredulous. "You… knew about this technique?"

She shrugged. "I was assigned to protect some of the Agri-corps members a couple of times as a padawan. They have had to set up counters for it, classes and mentoring. With everything children need to learn here, there just isn't time.

"At least," she shrugged, a little sadly, "that's what Master Gallia said when I asked her."

Oh. Well… Anakin supposed he could see that. That did not mean he agreed with it.

"Agri-corps members tend to be some of the strongest users of the Force in the galaxy, at least as far as I've come across," Siri went on, leaning back on her hand and looking into the distance as she remembered. "But they're more susceptible to anything felt through the Force – both positive and negative. And seeing as their assignments tend to take them to destroyed or damaged planets… it can be a mental strain." Then she snorted and took another sip of her drink. "You don't want to know how devastating it can be to have a dark-side user around them."

Anakin's insides suddenly went cold.

He remembered finding Jedi on inhospitable worlds doing their best to heal them after the disaster that had been the Clone Wars… many of them hadn't been able to do more than block one or two strikes and preferred to fight him with the Force… and they'd been in pain. Just from his presence… So many of them…

Somewhere in his mind, he felt the other shoe drop – finally.

He'd known it was coming… but still…

"Anakin," Siri said worriedly. "Anakin… what's wrong?"

He felt as if his mind was working through static and he stared into the distance, unable to see beyond the memories of the faces of these 'weak' Jedi as they died before him…

"I was so blind…" he whispered.

Her worry increased. "I thought we'd already established that and correctly put most of the blame on Sidious." Not all of it. Anakin had his own share. He appreciated that she would never brush his sins off, even as he shook his head, still not looking at her.

"Even as a Sith, I couldn't see the strength I so longed for… right in front of me. I had my idea of strength and just… killed everything else."

Anakin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He'd known the Sith were wrong… but it still felt like a revelation somehow. Sith only saw the ability to destroy as power. Ironically, the strongest Force users weren't the warriors. It made sense that the light – that lent itself to healing and growing and *living*, even the Unifying Force – wouldn't produce the strongest warriors.

Siri just stared at him, troubled and didn't answer. This had probably been obvious to her, but he couldn't help but feel thankful she still listened. Her knowledge of his past likely helped there.

"I… I didn't realize…" Not that it would have made a difference. Anyone who could use the Force was a threat that had to be eliminated.

"It's… it's no excuse. I ignored any power they had – it wasn't my definition of power. And because they couldn't – or wouldn't – fight back, I killed them. Hunted them down and slaughtered them… because that's what Vader did." What he'd been practically *forged* to do.

As if the younglings hadn't been bad enough.

No… that was still worse. But that didn't stop the horror he felt at killing innocent planet healers… it wasn't exactly a high bar to set. It also didn't stop the sickness growing in his stomach that time and time again, the answers he'd been looking for – the sheer power and abilities he'd thought had been hidden from him – were right there, in front of him, the whole time.

But a Sith couldn't have ever seen that and a Jedi who had never been an initiate wouldn't have known to look.

"Every time I think I've finally made progress, something just makes it worse," he said through his hands, wondering when he'd covered his

face with them.

Siri seemed to be at a loss as she just sighed and moved to sit next to him. "Yeah."

He wanted to snort. That was all she had to say? Well, it was probably all he deserved.

Then she spoke again. "I don't think that will ever change."

Anakin turned his head slowly to look at her, almost disbelieving. Was that really the right thing to say to someone with *his* issues?

She returned his stare tiredly. Right… his realizations and the resulting emotions must have hurt her too. He wondered if Obi-wan, wherever he and Ferus had gone, was alright. Did he feel the episodes like this?

Oh, Ahsoka was going to kill him. At least it hadn't been as bad as before… but still.

"You weren't a good person," Siri said bluntly. Anakin winced at the sheer enormity of that understatement more than at the fact that she stated it aloud. He was grateful the salles were pretty empty at this point. "Everything you unpack will have layers upon layers upon layers to examine and you'll find that your actions had consequences. And I'm pretty sure it'll suck.

"But… it's nothing new," she said with a tentative smile. "And you've dealt with it before. I know it's not easy, but I'm sure you'll deal with it now, even as it builds – will continue to build."

He continued to stare at her for several seconds, unsure of what to feel at that. But then relief blossomed in his chest. Her belief in him… that was far more than he deserved, but he'd be grateful for it.

Anakin closed his eyes and let out a breath. Then he felt his lips curl into a smile. It was bitter and probably looked painful, but it was real and definitely warm.

"Thank you," he heard himself whisper.

"Any time," she said. "You know I'll tell you the truth. Just don't expect me to sugar coat it."

He snorted at that.

"Why would I ever expect you to somehow be *tactful* towards me."

She returned his smile, although hers seemed sad but hopeful. "And don't you forget it."

"You won't let me."

Siri gasped in mock offense. "How could you say such a thing?" she asked dramatically, clutching at her heart and letting out a pitiful noise.

Anakin just rolled his eyes and shook his head in exasperation, feeling immensely better.

"Well," he said as he stood, "Are we going to go and look through that data again."

Siri groaned. "Noooo!" she said weakly, reaching up as if asking him to save her from falling off a cliff or something.

Anakin stared at her, deadpan. "Who is the adult here?" he asked.

The blond grinned cheekily up at him. "No one ever said I couldn't act like a brat every now and then. I have to give you your own medicine, after all."

"I do *not* act like that," he said, folding his arms over his chest and tapping his foot.

Siri laughed at that and stood, brushing herself off and reaching over to grab her discarded cloak.

"Maybe not, but it was nice to see you acting like a kid, earlier," she said, suddenly serious and sincere. "You looked free."

Anakin stared at her again for several seconds.

Finally, he looked down. "I've never been free."

He felt her hand on his head, ruffling his hair before he could take a step back in offense. "You're more free than you realize. And one day, you'll see it."

Before he could say anything else, though, she walked past him and down the stairs.

"Coming or not?" she called out behind him.

He huffed, but quickly fell into step behind her.

xXx

"I would like to tell you a couple of things," Master Kleon said the next time they came to their Force Techniques class and settled down. "Many of you have expressed interest in joining the Agri-corps after our last class, and while I admit that Jedi Carom's class was… enlightening, there are some things you need to know.

"First, using positive emotion as a focal point is dangerous." Anakin's amusement at the man using the same words in almost the same awed tone as him suddenly fell away as he cringed. He mentally kicked himself for not seeing that coming. "It is based off a dark technique and cannot be used except under the careful watch of a Master. Do you understand?"

Several of the younglings exchanged glances, but they all chorused, "Yes, Master Kleon."

He smiled.

"As for some of those techniques…" he continued, then went on to explain more or less exactly what Siri had told him about the group meditation. The children around him went from excited and curious to worried and nervous.

"In any case," the Gran finished, "I want those of you who enjoyed the class last time to give this careful thought. Being a member of the Agri-corps is just as demanding and difficult – albeit in different ways – as being a Jedi Knight.

"Besides," he smiled and gestured towards the door. It opened and the most… roguish Jedi Anakin had ever seen walked in. He didn't wear a robe so much as a trenchcoat with a hood thrown back. He had tall, scuffed boots and wore a long, open vest in fairly bright colors under his coat but over a loose tunic. He had dark skin and hair and an animal Anakin had never seen trailed after him. The quadruped had red-brown scales – almost like plates – covering its body, bulbous, blue eyes, and many, *many* teeth. Yet it followed the man inside and sat obediently at his heels.

It took Anakin a moment to realize he could feel the animal through the Force and he had to wonder why he'd never come across such animals before.

"This is Seeker Jor'oro Boak, a member of the Jedi Explorcorps."

"Hey," the man said with an easy smile.

Anakin sat forward, the excitement from the other children catching.

This was fast becoming his favorite class.

xXx

"That was *awesome*!" Coira said as they left the classroom, discussing everything the man had just explained. Apparently the Exploration Corps had a *moving temple*… a series of ships that they took from place to place on scouting missions. That alone blew Anakin's mind. The idea of being in the middle of space for training at any given point sounded *extremely* appealing to him.

They took all sorts at the Explorcorps, apparently. They needed people who could negotiate, people who could fight, people who could fly, people who could build… and they didn't seem to mind attachments as much as the man had introduced his Akk dog, Morta, who was (apparently) his life-long companion.

It sounded *perfect* for Anakin. Or, it would have been in his previous life. He wished he'd known about it as more than just a vague entity before.

"The Agri-corps class was better, though," Tru pointed out.

Anakin had to concede that point.

"So? This was still awesome! It's like being a Knight, but out *exploring* everything!" Coira countered. And, according to Seeker Boak, they dealt with analyzing plant life and properties on new planets – studying biology as much as the Agri-corps, but more along the line of animals than plants. They would be the first contact of new, space-faring species, and they would examine anomalies…

Anakin wasn't seeing much of a down side.

"I didn't realize the corps were so… cool," Darra agreed. "I always thought they were where the… well, the *leftovers* went. But that's not true at all!"

Anakin smiled. Teaching the Jedi at a young age to be less judgmental was something he could definitely get behind too.

"I wonder what the Medi-corps are like!" Hik'te said thoughtfully.

"Well, like the Edu-corps members," Thoran said, nudging Maelee who smiled back at him, "we interact with them fairly often."

"Really?" Tru asked Maelee.

The dark-haired girl nodded regally. "Jedi are often sent to help the Explorcorps, but a Jedi Knight or Master can also be a Medicorp member or an Educorp member. There are many members of both here at the Temple who are part of those two corps only, but there are many members who also hold a rank as a traditional Jedi."

"Huh," Tru replied, looking contemplative. "I wonder why just those."

The others seemed about as confused as Anakin.

"Just what?" he asked.

Tru turned to him, walking backwards down the hall, and shrugged. "Well, in the corps you have exploration, animals, plants and chemical sciences, Education, Medical and then the regular Jedi that kind of fill in everything else. It seems more like the Knights and Masters are the 'leftovers'. Not the other way around."

Huh. Anakin blinked at the thought as it certainly had merit.

(And the way too intelligent child syndrome struck again… perhaps he should keep tally at this rate.)

"Maybe there should be more corps," Thoran spoke up. "There are other areas Jedi can be useful at. Like information gathering." He grinned.

"Technology," Hale said quietly.

"Exactly!" Tru said as they approached the hallway where Anakin would have to leave them to go to his meeting with Master Xio.

That reminded him of the time of the week and how he wasn't looking forward to the Senate tomorrow.

Of course, that brought up another thought, leading back to what they'd just been speaking of.

"Politics," Anakin said.

The others all turned to look at him, confused.

He waved a hand nonchalantly. "We all learn politics, but we don't actively take part in them most of the time. Or at least, the temple *tries* not to." And fails. Spectacularly. "Knowing, and even participating in, politics from a more galaxy-wide perspective could be very useful for Jedi."

Many of the other children nodded, looking thoughtful.

"Right now, the Edu-corps takes care of most of that," Maelee pointed out.

"Ah," Anakin replied and then nodded at her.

Before anyone could say anything else, he broke away from the group. "Well, I will see you after third meal," he said over his shoulder. "I look forward to more of your insights on the subject."

A chorus of 'Byes' and 'Laters' met him and he couldn't help but smile as he turned a corner and stalked towards the meeting room. He wasn't really looking forward to it as Siri had made him promise he would talk about what he'd realized the other night, but—

A sudden pain shot through his chest and a rush of cold surrounded him. He gasped and clutched at his tunic, managing (somehow) to not fall to his knees and very grateful that no one had been in that particular hall to see him.

It took him several seconds to realize that the emotions weren't coming from him… but from…

"Obi-wan," he whispered.

After a moment, he pulled out his comm to call Siri.

He didn't know what, or why, or how, but something had just gone horribly wrong.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Sorry it's so short, but yeah... remember when I said it'd start to go downhill again? *ahem* We still have several chapters of fallout and set up... BUT...

I'll stop there. ;)

Most of the info I got about the corps I got from wookiepedia.

I'd like to thank Carradee, Khalthar, Quathis, Phantrekker and my Discord for this chapter. Thank you guys so much! :D

Discord: discord.gg/EVUrHMd4za

Thank you for reading! I may not always respond to reviews and comments, but I read all of them.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin missed his mind-healing session. He'd commed both Master Xio and Girth to let them know, and neither one of them seemed very comfortable with him skipping a session when he had to see Sidious tomorrow, but he felt this was… well, if not more important, than definitely more immediate. He'd initially called Siri, who had tried to comm Obi-wan, and had not gotten through. So she set up the appointment to see one of the Council members ASAP and had been able to get in fairly quickly, despite her former Master being off planet at the moment.

Anakin ended up having to tell Mace Windu that 'something' had 'happened' to Obi-wan, that yes, he was sure of it, but no, he didn't know *what* had happened and couldn't describe it in more than extremely vague terms, and then just watched as the Master sighed, rubbed his forehead and nodded. And wasn't that a common sight he'd seen often in his first youth. He couldn't remember if that particular trend had started this early then or not.

Mace assured Anakin that they'd reach out to Obi-wan's ship and the comm numbers of all on board immediately. He must have seen that that wasn't good enough in the initiate's books because he even said they'd send a ship out to the planet Obi-wan was supposed to be training Ferus on if they didn't reach anyone by the end of the day. Anakin would prefer they sent a ship out *now*, but was also aware that demanding more would not be helpful at this point.

He thanked Master Windu, bowed and turned to walk out when the Master did something rather unexpected.

"How are you doing, Initiate?" he asked, drawing Anakin's head back around to stare at him in confusion. Wasn't his current state of emotion obvious? Either it wasn't, or Windu had an ulterior motive, although Anakin couldn't think of what it would be.

"I am… worried," he finally said.

Mace looked like he wanted to sigh at that, but didn't. Instead, he shook his head. "I mean otherwise. How is your life in the Temple

going so far?"

Anakin glanced back at Siri, who looked (and felt) just as confused as he did. She shrugged and he shot her an annoyed glare because that didn't help in the slightest. She just gave him a 'what do you want?' expression and shrugged again.

He withheld a sigh of his own and turned back to the Council member warily. "I… am fine," he finally said. "Objectively, I am doing… rather well, actually."

Mace, who had observed Anakin and Siri's interaction with a blank expression, nodded. "Good." He seemed a little awkward when he asked his next question (strange, because Mace Windu and 'awkward' weren't usually consecutive words in a sentence). "Before you go, do you… have any questions for me?"

It took Anakin a moment to remember his most recent sparring session with Windu and realize he was checking up on his 'dark side tendencies'. That made sense. He considered brushing the question off, but he did still wish to cultivate good relationships with Council members. Mace Windu was a good place to start and would likely be easier to talk to than the others seeing as he'd figured out his 'dark' past.

So he turned and faced the man again, respectfully.

"I appreciate the concern, but it is not necessary," he assured the man. "In truth I do not remember a time in my life where I have experienced so much…" he paused, looking for the right word. "Positivity." Not perfect, but close. Even in his previous life, he had always felt such an underlying resentment towards slavers or the Jedi and Obi-wan as he adjusted to a new life, or Sidious for obvious reasons. He'd known happiness (especially with Padmè) but it had rarely lasted when they were apart. Feeling as if he could maintain a more positive attitude for longer made him realize that his therapists were right: he really had come a long ways towards a healthier lifestyle without dipping into that rage and despair that had punctured his life before.

Even if his current life still had those kinds of episodes, it still felt overall more positive than any other time before.

Mace seemed to relax a little at that. "Good," he said with a nod. "So you are enjoying your time here?"

Anakin found he was able to smile through his worry for Obi-wan, even if it was a little forced. "Yes. Well, more than I thought I would."

The bald man nodded again, then looked thoughtful, as if he had something more to say.

Before he did, though, Anakin remembered a question he had for the man.

"Sir," he said slowly. Mace focused on him and gestured for him to continue. "The other day, while speaking with one of my friends, he made a decision. The choice surprised me and… the Force *shifted*."

Mace frowned thoughtfully, looking interested. "Shifted?" he asked.

Anakin's brow furrowed. "I… don't know how else to describe it. It felt as if one future had been switched for another, I suppose. At least that is what I assume happened." He stood solidly and took a measured breath. "Is that a shatterpoint?"

He found it both amusing and reliving that he still knew the older man well enough to note the surprise in his otherwise blank expression. Then the thoughtful look returned.

After a few seconds of contemplation, his eyebrows drew together and he shook his head. "I don't know. Shatterpoints manifest differently for me. They are more like a point of weaknesses and strengths coming together, each with certain consequences that I can manipulate if I can figure out how. Some are easy – obvious even – to figure out, some take time, thought, energy and research. Some…" he faded off, shaking his head.

"However, I have experienced something similar when I figure out and take advantage of an event-based shatterpoint." He looked back at Anakin, seeming more interested than before. "Perhaps you, whether you realized it or not, took advantage of an existing shatterpoint and felt the consequences of it?"

That… actually sounded extremely plausible. Anakin thought about the validity of the conjecture for a moment before Mace spoke again.

"Did you feel or sense or see anything before hand? Something indicating the potential consequences of the choices given to your friend?"

Anakin blinked and thought back to when Tru had made the choice to

go to the Agri-corps, but didn't remember anything that Mace described, so he shook his head.

If he didn't know any better, he'd say the man looked… disappointed.

"It may very well have been a shatterpoint," the Master said, "but until you can somehow sense them, this sounds more like a fluke than anything."

Anakin nodded, having come to a similar conclusion himself. He wasn't sure whether having the ability to see shatterpoints would have been a positive or negative development at this point, so perhaps he should be grateful.

"Well," Mace said after a moment of silence, "I did have something else I wanted to ask you."

Anakin felt his eyebrows lift a little in surprise. Mace wasn't usually that cautious, tersely asking what he wanted to ask most of the time.

"Master?" he asked, prompting him to continue.

Mace took a measured breath of his own. "I would like to ask you to be my Padawan."

The world froze.

Or, it seemed to. Perhaps that was just Anakin's brain not working because *what. The. KRIFF?!*

He could honestly only stand there and blink as he tried to wrap his head around that proposal. A proposal he would have never considered coming from this man. It probably didn't help that Siri seemed just as taken aback as Anakin.

It begged the question… *why*?

It didn't take long for Anakin's slowly rebooting mind to come up with an answer. He wanted to keep an eye on Anakin – make sure he didn't fall again, or fall farther, or somehow turn on the Jedi. Yes, that made sense.

He ignored the disappointment he felt at the realization and opened his mouth, but the Master held up his hand.

"You don't have to answer now and," his eyes flicked over to Siri before settling back on Anakin, "you must do what will be the best for

you – follow the Force's will. Know that because I am on the Council, training will mainly take place here in the Temple. We won't leave it often. Despite that, I expect hard work and dedication. I can be a strict taskmaster and learning under me will not be easy, although I do think it will be beneficial, which is why I decided to offer in the first place. Know that there will be no punishment of any kind for a negative answer. I may be a Council member, but at the end of the day, I'm just a Jedi. All I ask is that you consider the offer and choose wisely."

Anakin worked his mouth for a moment before any sound came out. When it finally did, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"I-I will, Master!" then he realized his child brain had taken over again and forced himself to calm down. Then he bowed. "Choose wisely, I mean. I am honored you would even consider me." That was polite enough, he hoped. His mind felt a little fuzzy as he stood.

"You may leave, now, Initiate. Knight."

"Thank you," he said, and turned to leave the room in a daze, Siri behind him. It took him an entire, silent elevator ride and a minimum of two separate hallways for the realization of what Mace had just asked him to sink in.

At that point, he laughed. It started as an incredulous snicker, then quickly escalated to a snort and then a full on guffaw. Eventually, he had to stop and lean against the hallway wall for an unknown amount of time as the ridiculousness of the entire situation hit him. He hoped no one passing in the hallways noticed the slightly hysterical note to his tone of voice.

After a few moments, he felt someone guide him into a nearby classroom, an empty one, thankfully, and he followed, still laughing. Once the door closed, he looked up to see a concerned Siri.

"Anakin?" she asked warily.

He snorted again.

Darth Vader. Snorting.

That did nothing to help his current state of mind.

Still, he forced himself to answer. "Surely you can see the irony. The first time I came here, a young, dedicated child, I was practically

shunned for a good portion of my early life. I turned against everything I ever knew, fell and became everything the Order fights against, and only after that did they accept me." He shook his head, unable to wipe the smile off of his face. "I have had four separate offers to become a padawan if you count yourself and Yaddle," who had, admittedly, offered as a reason to get him away from Sidious more than anything, but still. "One of them comes from Mace Kriffing Windu," he finally finished and burst into laughter again. "Him. The head of the Jedi Council. Teaching a former Sith." The only thing that would make it more ironic would be if he didn't know about Anakin's dark past.

Siri's eyebrows drew together and she did not join in Anakin's laughter. "You… sound bitter." And he probably felt it too.

"If I'd been so accepted the first time," he commented as he struggled to regain his composure, "I doubt I would have fallen. At least not… like I did." He shook his head and took a couple more deep breaths, folding his arms as he leaned against one of the tables.

The older blond let out a long breath before she nodded, although she just looked meloncholic. "I suppose you're not wrong. We really dropped the ball back then, didn't we."

Anakin scoffed, not responding to the rhetorical statement she hadn't phrased as a question.

"But even then, it probably wouldn't have been difficult for Sidious to undermine any acceptance," she pointed out.

The younger of them finally felt all of the amusement and annoyance and frustration dissipate, leaving nothing but tiredness in its wake. So much like the anger he used to rely on.

"True," was all he could mutter.

They sat there in relative silence for several seconds before Anakin noticed Siri studying him.

"If you have something you wish to say, speak," he finally said.

She just shook her head sadly. "It's nothing."

Anakin stared at her dryly, but she didn't say anything more about it.

"Would you like me to call Master Xio – or was it Girth today? – to see

if you can still see them?"

The smaller time-traveler frowned, then sighed. "I… think I really need to sleep right now. It's… been a long day."

Siri didn't look like she completely agreed with that, but thankfully, she nodded.

"Want me to walk you back to the crèche?"

Right about then, Anakin realized she was genuinely worried about him and the remaining bitterness in his heart finally melted away. He appreciated the thought. Truly. However, he shook his head.

"I'll be fine, Siri," he assured her. "Why don't you take a break and get some rest too?"

She looked like she would object for a moment, but must have realized that doing so would spur him into ignoring his own body and so, nodded.

"Fine. As long as you promise to go straight to third meal and then to your room."

He smiled, small but warm, and nodded back.

She returned the gesture curtly. "Good. Now let's head off."

They parted ways just a couple of halls later and Anakin met his crèchemates in the dining hall. He tried not to think of everything – of Obi-wan and Mace Windu and Sidious tomorrow without seeing his therapist tonight – but failed rather massively.

Of course, they noticed. Stang perceptive children.

Assuring his friends that he would be fine, he retired early to bed and had almost reached his room when a message on his comm went off.

He checked it and groaned, not caring if it sounded childish.

It was from Dooku, and he wanted to meet soon.

Of course.

xXx

A lesson Anakin Skywalker had only learned once he became a Sith

was that when someone he loved got hurt, the universe continued. Life went on. The galaxy kept moving, no matter how much he didn't want it to.

He hat— disliked it immensely.

If the Temple got a hold of Obi-wan, they didn't tell him before he found himself walking up to the meeting with Palpatine. That, of course, only compounded his worry and he regretted not making sure to talk to at least one of his therapists last night. It didn't help that despite turning in early, he didn't feel like he'd gotten nearly enough sleep and couldn't even meditate through his worry. Finding a positive emotion through his upset just… hadn't worked.

He wasn't looking forward to the tongue-lashing Ahsoka would give him the next time he saw her either.

The worst part was how he knew he *shouldn't* be worried about his former master. He knew Obi-wan was a capable knight, and yes Anakin had had to rescue him multiple times, but he had Ferus and another knight with him. Something had happened, but Obi-wan was still also *alive* (he could sense it through their bond), so until they got news…

He hated feeling helpless.

Anakin wasn't even aware he could feel this… *off* simply from his worry for his former (future?) master anymore. In his first life, it had been the norm. Now, though? It bothered him that he just couldn't seem to put it behind him. He didn't *want* to be this worried about Obi-wan. He didn't want to care…

Because where had that gotten him before?

And yet, his stupid, newly regrown, metaphysical heart hadn't gotten the memo.

It *hurt.*

Not knowing what had happened was worse than knowing he'd been killed, somehow. And he couldn't *stop thinking about it.*

So now he had to face one of his worst nightmares when he was definitely *not* prepared. This… would be a long day.

He still tried to prepare himself for the upcoming confrontation as best

he could. First, he had to brace himself for the man's attention. Surely he would have the worm figured out and Anakin would have to speak with him again. He'd have to find *some* sort of center… and yet any peace he'd managed just seemed to slip from his grasp.

This was such a bad idea… and yet, he couldn't, in good conscience, turn around. He had to go on and be prepared for the worst...

Which was why he found himself surprised when he got to the Chancellor's office and heard rumors about *another* worm.

Anakin didn't believe in luck. Either Siri had somehow modified or made another one, or someone else had copied the idea…

He didn't believe in coincidences.

The secretary looked rather frazzled as she smiled at him and handed him a data pad with his list of duties for the next couple of hours. He didn't have to even come in contact with Palpatine at all. The amount of relief he felt at that almost had him falling to his knees, but he managed to keep control of his body as he left to deliver some messages and packages directly from the Chancellor.

Three hours later, he walked back towards the office, hoping that the new worm was still making Palpatine's life difficult. If he could escape without having to speak to the man this week, he would thank the Force… literally and aloud… multiple times, if he had to.

Unfortunately, when he got there, the secretary was busy with a comm call and gestured for him to go to the waiting chairs around the outside of the office. Anakin tried not to let his disappointment show as he nodded and clutched the datapad in one hand. He looked around for an empty seat (there was always someone waiting to see the Chancellor, apparently) when one particular person stood out to him. She sat alone, away from many of the other people there, some of whom were speaking boisterously or intensely with one another. She looked young. Very young. Only a decade or so older than Anakin's biological age.

He honestly hadn't expected to see her. He'd never run into her in the Senate building before. It was, after all, a large building and he didn't find himself going by her planet's offices often.

And yet…

Out of curiosity (and, perhaps hoping for a little solidarity), he walked

up to her, hoping he looked more nervous than intrigued, and stood in front of her.

"Senator Mothma, from Chandrilla, correct?" he asked.

She looked up, grey-blue eyes wide and open, but still guarded. She hadn't been expecting someone, but that didn't mean she wasn't ready to… do whatever she'd come to do. Ask something? Debate? Persuade?

Her eyes widened further when she saw who stood before her, looking him up and down. She must have recognized the robes at least, because her eyes lit with realization and then confusion. Understandable. Chandrilla hadn't been in the last shuffling for a Jedi Padawan.

"Yes," she said. "How may I help you, Padawan…" she faded off instead of directly inquiring after his name.

"Initiate," he corrected. "Initiate Skywalker. I am waiting to see the Chancellor," he glanced over his shoulder at the secretary, who didn't look like she'd be finished any time soon and seemed rather put-out. Then he looked back at her. "I was wondering if I might sit by you?"

The surprise returned, but she didn't do more than blink and gesture to the seat next to her. "Of course."

"Thank you," he said politely, nodding at her as he took the seat.

"If I may ask," she said after a few seconds of silence, "why sit here?"

He shrugged, glancing around the room at the various representatives, senators and other officials. "Everyone else looked busy."

She seemed rather amused by that. "True. Are you the Chancellor's Jedi Ambassador?"

"Yes," he nodded, then decided to try and play up his childlike image. "I'm the first one and it's… a lot of pressure."

Her eyes softened. "Yes, I can see how that would be."

"Why are you here?" he asked curiously.

Her face fell into a mild scowl. "I wished to see the Chancellor regarding some recent laws passed in my planet's sector. Laws he supported."

Part of Anakin couldn't help but be surprised. She'd had problems with the Chancellor this early in the game? But part of him just had to sit back and admire her attention to detail. No wonder she'd headed the rebellion in the future.

He glanced around and saw no one else paying attention to them, for now, and checked for anything nearby that could pick up or record their conversation. He couldn't always pin point anything he sensed, but he could usually get something. He got nothing. Hmm.

So he chose his next words carefully. "You… don't seem like you particularly care for our esteemed Chancellor."

Mon Mothma blinked at him in surprise again, studying Anakin with her sharp gaze. "I wouldn't say that," she said, her own tone just as slow and cautious. "He has pushed through some much needed changes in some areas that I definitely approve of."

Anakin cocked his head to one side. "But…?" he prompted.

Her eyebrows drew together ever so slightly, looking troubled. When she spoke, her voice had quieted even further. "He's not consistent. The larger, more obvious policies have tended to favor freedom for the people, it is true. But some of his more subtle policies… don't." Her hands tightened into fists. She must not see him as a threat. Good. She wasn't supposed to. She continued.

"They – the policies – tend to favor the upper class. Most Senators – myself included – belong to the upper class, so it is difficult for them to see some of the effects. I… am not sure if I should count myself lucky or unlucky that I came into contact directly with people who have been affected. The encounter… caused me to look deeper.

"The pattern I've found suggests that the face he presents – the kind chancellor in favor of democracy – is a mask, and his true motives are far more… self serving. It's not unusual in a politician, he's just… better at it than most. So, until I can understand what his true motives are, I simply can't trust him."

Over the course of her confession, she'd tensed more and more. A few moments after she finished, she sighed, her body relaxing ever so slightly.

"I suppose I'm just… disappointed. I heard so many good things about him, but he's just a normal politician."

Anakin had to admit, he was impressed. Most Senators weren't in the position to see what she'd managed to discover. He wondered briefly what the incident she'd spoken of where she'd come to see the effects she'd spoken of, but ultimately decided it wasn't his place to ask.

Instead he looked away, eyes fixed on the door to the Chancellor's receiving room. "Your instincts serve you well," he finally said, his own voice quiet, but hard. "Do not let anyone tell you otherwise."

The red-headed Senator looked surprised, far more openly than he'd seen before. "You… agree?"

Anakin nodded. "I do."

She didn't seem to know what to say to that, which Anakin found amusing. He'd never known her to be speechless. Then again, he hadn't known her well, but he imagined she'd be like Padmè in that particular instance… if not as good. Or as pretty. Or as involved until she had to be… or was he being overly generous to the love of his life?

Padmè would have been an amazing Rebellion leader.

"Why?" The Senator's voice finally speaking brought him out of his reverie and he had to think back to what they'd been speaking off before he'd been pleasantly distracted by Padmè's memory. Right, she was asking him why he agreed with her about Palpatine.

He thought about that. "I… was born a slave," he said softly. "The will of the Force led me to the Jedi, who have taken me in, despite my age. However, the Chancellor reminds me of one of my masters."

He hated seeing the pitying look on her face, but didn't expect differently.

"A slave," she said, her own voice soft. "I'm glad you got away from that life."

Well, he could appreciate that at least. He nodded.

"You had… owners?" She sounded like she was trying (and failing) to hide her absolute disgust.

He nodded again. "Yes. Three, that I remember." Because if she and Palpatine ever compared notes, he needed them to be compatible.

She looked heartbroken. "At such a young age…"

Anakin shrugged. "I was born into it, and such is the life of a slave."

Senator Mothma watched him for several seconds, hesitant again and studying him as if seeing him in a new light. "I… have to admit," she said carefully, "I do not think of Chancellor Palpatine as a slave master. Only a politician."

The time-traveler had to hold back a snort at that. Instead, he only 'hmmed'. "Perhaps…" he finally said, meeting her gaze pointedly, "there are more parallels than even you realize."

She looked taken aback, but before she could respond, the secretary called his name. He stood and bowed shallowly to her. "It has been a pleasure speaking with you," he said before turning and walking away, leaving a stunned young woman behind him.

When he reached the desk, the secretary looked at him sympathetically. "I'm so sorry, Anakin," she said. "I don't think he'll be able to see you this week."

He tried to look disappointed before he handed over the data pad. "That's okay. He's a busy man."

"He said in repayment that you can visit the droid recycling center we have here and choose anything of your choice if you so want it. But he stressed that it's only if you want it." She held up a card for him. "He won't even ask what you took."

So that was his ploy. Grooming him for gifts through a woman (who the child he painted would be more likely to trust) while trying to address his former fears.

The problem was, if he didn't give the man *something*, he may very well raise too many suspicions. Anakin bit his lip, looking at the card reluctantly.

"And… and he can't take it back?" he said.

She nodded. "We don't take gifts back here," she assured him. When he still looked hesitant, she leaned forward, "Besides, how can we take something back if we don't even know what you chose?"

Still reluctant (something he very much felt), he reached forward and took the card, then bowed to her as he had to Mon Mothma. "Thank

you," he said.

"Good bye, Anakin," she replied. "Be safe on your way back."

"I will," he responded before turning and walking out.

He visited the garage, but didn't take anything. He could have used half-a-dozen things his eyes immediately landed on, but he couldn't give that man the satisfaction. He made a show of going through things, just to appease the secret Sith Lord without actually appeasing him.

He knew it was silly, but it felt like a win to him, and he didn't know why, but he decided to accept it anyway. Anakin surprised himself by actually smiling as he left the building.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I'd like to thank Carradee, Quathis, Khalthar, ShadowGirlLost22 and the awesome people on my Discord who have helped me out with this chapter!

So, it's a week early due to more family deaths… because apparently losing two grandparents in a year isn't enough. Sigh I'm actually doing about as well as can be expected. This one has been a long-time coming. I didn't think I'd be in the right mind-set next week to read comments, let alone answer any of them. (Sorry if I haven't answered comments before, I really do love to read them, I just get overwhelmed sometimes by the sheer amount – however, the comments do keep me going on this, so please, feel free, I just may not be able to answer.) In any case, next month will likely have a chapter out the week of the 25th like normal. Sorry to make you wait longer, but hope you're happy to get this earlier. :)

Silver lining, right?

NGL, I didn't expect this chapter to happen. I suppose I'm just doomed to write a slow burn, right up until the end. I expected this to kind of break and swirl down rapidly about three chapters ago. =.= It WILL happen.

Eventually. *ahem*

Also, I do think that I'm going to be writing Anakin's next therapy session as a side story. I love the therapy sessions, I know many

people who read this who do, I know many people who think it drags the story down… and at this point, I can see where they're coming from. So, likely more therapy sessions as apart of the story… if anyone has a suggestion for a good title with 'Sight' in it dealing with conflicting emotions and much baggage, I'd be appreciative. Can't have the words 'hindsight', 'foresight', 'outsight', 'resight', 'oversight' or 'insight' in it as those are already used or are planned. You can leave your suggestion in a comment here r you can head over to my discord: discord.gg/FFBTUDtESY

Chapter Note

Note: Instead of a chapter this month, we're getting a Sister Story - Trials of the Nearsighted (Should be the next story in the Force of Many Sights series). It is a therapy story that would normally be a chapter, but since I feel the story should be picking up it's pace right now and that more therapy chapters at this point would bog the story down, it is its own story. That being said, it really was a necessary part I had to develop before I felt I could move on so... yes. Apologies for those of you who don't like the therapy chapters.

This note has been requested and depending on the feedback, it may be a placeholder for the chapter if I later decide it would fit. Right now I don't think so, but my stories have taken over and thrown my expectations to the wind before. LOL

Thank you for your time.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin returned from the Senate just before third meal and found Siri waiting for him once again on the Temple steps. She had a data pad in her hand and looked tense as she sat wrapped in her robe despite the warm day.

Part of his mouth went dry because while finding her waiting for him wasn't exactly unusual, the manner in which she waited was. Had she heard some news about Obi-wan?

He picked up his pace, rushing up the Temple steps towards her.

"Siri!" he called out. She looked up and her expression of puzzlement spread to concern as she stood and took a couple of steps down to meet him.

"Anakin! Are you alright?" she asked worriedly. He paused, a little surprised at that. Was she worried for him? Well, he supposed that wasn't an entirely unfounded concern.

"I'm fine. I didn't even see him. What about you? What about Obi-wan? Did you hear any news?"

She looked both relieved and surprised at his words, but the moment he mentioned Obi-wan, the worry returned and she looked over her shoulder at the Temple.

"No. Nothing."

"Oh," Anakin said, awkwardly falling quiet.

"It's only been a day," she reassured, forcing a smile and a cheerful tone. "I'm sure we'll hear something soon."

Anakin frowned up at her, unimpressed, and she dropped the poor act. Funny, normally she was a phenomenal actress.

"I've always… disliked this waiting," she said quietly. "Not knowing, maybe never knowing."

The younger blond nodded solemnly. "I, as well."

She frowned at him. "You're talking strangely again. And you said you didn't meet *him*?" She raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Yes. It seems he was busy with a new worm infecting his system," he said dryly. "So I waited in the lobby most of the time and had a rather interesting discussion with Mon Mothma, the Senator from Chandrilla.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?" He crossed his arms, unsure as to whether he should look amused or annoyed.

Siri just blinked at him. "Another worm? Seriously?"

Anakin's expression sobered. "You… didn't know?"

She shook her head. "No. Unless Quinlain did something he didn't tell me about… which, okay, he may have, but… I doubt it. He was pretty shaken up about the idea of a… well, you know what in the Senate," she said, looking around. No one was near them, but he appreciated her discretion.

"You should contact him and ask just to make sure, but… if it wasn't you, then who?" Anakin mused.

Siri snorted. "Well, it isn't like he doesn't have his own fair share of enemies."

"True," Anakin said. "This will likely be a study in futility."

"I agree," the older blond nodded thoughtfully. "Hmm…"

"Speaking of futility, though," the initiate started, a little uneasily.

"Hmm?" Siri asked again, apparently having gotten lost in thought. Anakin decided he'd rather show her than explain, so he took out his comm and opened it to the message Dooku had left on the prearranged site. The taller blond just stared at the message from the former Jedi.

From a *Fallen* Jedi.

From a potential *Sith*.

From a potential spy.

He'd tried not to think about it while at the Senate. Now, it seemed, he had no choice.

They sat there for several minutes in a harsh silence that neither one seemed to want to break.

"So, what do we do?" Siri finally asked, not because she didn't have her own ideas, but probably because she wanted to know where he stood.

There was a problem with that.

"I don't know," he said. He hadn't known what to do for the last several meetings between him and Dooku. Why did she think that would change now?

"We know he's Fallen," Siri pointed out, running a hand through her blond hair. She normally kept it in a pony tail, but at the moment, it fell loosely around her shoulders, ruffling slightly in the breeze. He must have caught her at a bad time. Well, one of her best friends and her former (from her point of view) padawan had gone missing. He supposed that no time was a 'good' time right now.

He empathized.

"We don't know why he wants to meet us," Anakin said.

"It has far more chance of being a trap," Siri supplied. "And we were wary before…"

They both sat there for several seconds.

"The Force says to go," Anakin finally said, putting his head in his hands.

"I know," Siri responded, putting her thumb and forefinger to the bridge of her nose.

Anakin looked up, surprised. "You feel it too?"

She shot him a dry glare. "Why wouldn't I?"

His face scrunched up like he'd bit a lemon. "That means it's most likely not the dark side telling me to go…"

Her expression smoothed out. "Oh."

More silence.

"I'll get my Zora outfit."

Anakin nodded. This would have to be handled delicately. Very delicately.

xXx

They walked back to her quarters in silence, not really wanting to talk about anything, especially where someone might overhear them. They only began to really plan once her door closed behind them.

"So, what's plan A?" he asked as she went into the back room.

"Send a message to Master Yoda. Use my comm if you have to," she called over her shoulder. "Let him know that we'll be leaving to see Dooku tomorrow and tell him where."

"I haven't figured out where yet."

"Pick something," she returned. "In any case, I'll approach him."

Anakin stopped typing the note for Master Yoda into the comm and looked up at where she'd disappeared into her room. "What?!"

"It follows your pattern of sending 'someone' in to speak with him and he'll know me from last time."

The initiate bit his lip. "I can't send you into a potential trap," he said.

"I'll tell him you hired me again. The trap will be set for you, not me, especially if I'm just the hired hand."

He wasn't comfortable with this. As Anakin, he'd never been comfortable sending other people into dangerous situations in his place. Or at all. He'd *done* it, especially during the war, but it had taken several harsh lessons from the Emperor himself before he'd really learned to delegate. He'd still hated it… and that may or may not have been part of the reason why half the people he worked with ended up dead as Vader… Because he'd never really gotten over the idea that if he wanted something done *right*, he'd have to do it himself.

This situation may or may not count as delegation, but letting other people do their jobs in conjunction with his was one of the few lessons from his time as Vader that he should probably incorporate into his life now.

"I don't like it," he said, but that was the most he would protest because she'd made her choice and he needed to respect that.

"Don't blame you," she said, walking back out with a garment bag over one shoulder and a case in her other hand. Then she smiled at him. "Actually, I'm kind of proud of you. I know how hard it is for you to trust other people."

Anakin felt a little bubble of warmth in his chest at her praise and acknowledgment, as well as his success in reaching a point where his tendencies leaned more towards what he'd been before Falling, but that didn't eliminate the cold bubble of worry in his stomach.

It must have shown on his face because she sighed. "Anakin," she said with a smile, "I can take care of myself."

He nodded. "I know."

She reached out and ruffled his hair. He leaned away, staring at her in blatant shock and offense.

"Thanks for caring, though," she said.

He still huffed, but decided to forgive her for the embarrassing treatment. This once. Besides, it wasn't like anyone else had been in the room to see it.

"Well, let's figure out where we're going tomorrow and let Dooku know," Siri said, pulling up the holoweb.

xXx

They picked out a bar in the lower levels a couple of districts away then sent their message to Dooku on the forums. They tried to go over the information they already had from Palpatine and make more connections there (Anakin had a hard time believing just *how much* information they'd gathered), but neither one of them seemed able to really focus. Finally, they just gave up for the night and went to bed. Siri even walked him back to his room, despite his exasperated protests.

Just before he slept, Anakin realized he hadn't been racing in over a week and he made plans to do so soon. Just… not tonight or tomorrow. As much as he would like to wish otherwise, he just didn't have the time.

He woke up feeling jittery and paranoid. His classes didn't help, seeming to drag on more than normal and he found himself anxiously waiting for the evening to come. Of course, he'd have to go to his session tonight with Master Xio. He wasn't sure if that would help or hinder him at this point.

Once he got into the session, they spoke of many things; Palpatine's new worm, Anakin's offers of padawanship, the Tuskan Raiders he'd killed in his first life and how to properly grieve. She even went into why some things his Jedi Masters had told him may have either skipped a few steps or not given him the full picture. It was, as usual, an emotionally straining session, but he felt he'd certainly learned new things and made progress.

He'd also decided not to accept Obi-wan's offer of padawanship. As much as he hated to let the good that he had with Obi-wan go, he'd outgrown what their relationship had initially given him. He hadn't brought it up to Master Xio, but he also really wanted to get to know the knight as more of a brother and a friend than a father figure. He hadn't yet decided on Mace Windu's offer, but for the sake of the galaxy was currently leaning towards 'no'. Still, he knew he could learn a lot from the man, so he hadn't shelved that completely either.

To be honest, Siri's offer was still on the table too… but right now, none of them felt *right*. He didn't know why and it grated on him.

He went to third meal feeling a little overwhelmed, something his friends seemed to pick up on (why hadn't he seen how great these children were the first time around? Well, he knew, but still) and he gratefully made his way through dinner and then headed straight to Siri's room, having everything on him that he'd need.

He ended up having to wait for a couple of minutes for her to come back from her own end meal and then they had to comm Yoda. He seemed just as wary as they were, but in the end allowed them to go as long as they promised to be careful. Anakin wondered if he really thought they wouldn't be or if that was him just trying to curb their natural, reckless tendencies.

In the end, he brushed the thought aside as they left to get another motel room where they could both put on their disguises. It didn't take Anakin long to don his Luke Lars outfit, and at that point he basically sat and watched Siri carefully apply her wig, the 'tattoo' she wore on the side of her face, the false earrings, the makeup. Slowly, she transformed into a completely different person and he honestly found

it fascinating.

"Did you do this every day?" he asked. "When you were under cover?"

She paused and glanced at him before going back to applying some mascara.

"Absolutely not. That was a permanent job, so I had to get more long-term alterations. Constantly dyed my hair, had it cut a certain way… even had some semi-permanent makeup applied. It's pretty common among bounty hunters."

She put the little wand back in the bottle and sat back, turning her face left and right to make sure she'd gotten everything, then nodded in satisfaction.

"I actually had to get my tattoo removed when I got back to the Temple," she said as she began to put everything away.

"Didn't want to keep it?" he asked, although to be fair, he wouldn't either.

"Kriff, no."

He snorted as she finished cleaning up, then stood and went to grab the garment bag. "Be out in a sec," she said as she went into the bathroom. Five minutes later, she came back out, completely dressed as Zora. Then he watched as she began placing vibroblades, blasters and her lightsaber on discreet parts of her costume.

Eventually she gathered her Jedi robes and smirked at Anakin.

"Ready."

"Okay," he said as he stood and followed her out the high window and into one of the back alleyways. Then they made their way to their speeder, which they'd parked in a blind spot when it came to the holocams, so no one could see them take the same speeder a couple of Jedi had come in before. (Or, if they would simply see two bounty hunters stealing a ride. They were honestly fine either way.)

Once they reached the general area Anakin let Siri off to wander down to the restaurant, making sure that she had a recording device, as there would likely be many jammers there. Then he went to park and followed her down. He reached the general street a little after she'd walked inside, and waited for her in a little cafe across the way. He

spent the time searching the area through the Force, because while he hadn't felt anything directed his way initially, that could very well change at any given moment, meanwhile keeping a metaphysical eye on what was going on inside through the Force.

Meanwhile he had to repeat to himself that Siri knew what she was doing.

xXx

Siri strode casually into the dim light of the diner, carefully scanning everything she could both with the Force and her other senses. Nothing really stood out, but then that was the point. They'd just wanted another dive to get lost in. Although it did feel colder than expected in the Force, now that she really concentrated.

So, he'd already come. Unsurprising.

It didn't take her long to find him. He sat in a booth where he could see everyone exiting and entering through every doorway within his view. The table was also very nearly in a blind spot when it came to the holo-recorders. He'd be out of the picture in any case, as would most of the table. Typical Dooku, picking the most advantageous spot for himself. Not that she could really blame him, but it still rubbed her the wrong way.

Then again, it was Dooku. Most things about him rubbed her wrong.

She still strode up to him, gesturing for a server as she did so, then took a seat across from him, giving off a nonchalant air. She was in this for the money, and didn't particularly care about the risks – at least that was the persona she wanted to portray.

"Well," the Count said stiffly. "If it isn't the backup dancer."

Ah, so he'd remembered that? Meant she could be a little playful and just touch looser with the rules than she'd initially planned on, but that was fine.

She shrugged. "Just here to test the waters. Easiest paycheck I've ever made." She noticed the waitress coming over (almost jealously noting the conservative uniform… lucky) and smiled at the man across from her. "You are getting the tab, right?"

If possible, his expression dried out even further, making him look utterly deadpan. "Yes."

Her smile widened. "He said you would."

Siri then proceeded to order the largest, most expensive meal the diner offered. Perhaps it was a bit petty – it wasn't like she'd put any sort of dent in the Count's coffers – but every now and then, she could indulge in some satisfactory payback, even if only in small ways. Besides, it was something her persona would do.

The waitress left and she turned her attention back on the former Jedi, smiling sweetly. "So, I'm here to see why you want to talk to the boss."

The man put a disk on the table. A data disk. "I will only give this to Lars himself, but this is the information he's looking for. I finally found enough of it that a skilled prosecutor will be able to put a very tight case together."

Siri's breath caught in her throat as she looked down at the disk. Was he implying that… the disk held the ever elusive evidence against Palpatine? She forced her eyes away from it and leaned her head on her arm casually.

"How are we to know this isn't a trap?"

Dooku sighed and pulled out a holo-reader, plugging the disk into it after looking around to make sure no one else was watching. The information that arose almost drew a gasp from her. Almost. A couple of months ago, it would have, but she'd finally gotten enough self-control back to forgo that. It had been a long, hard battle. One she was rather proud of.

Still, the information… It dealt with the clones. From what she could see, it was the initial clone order. And then several instructions for Dooku to start a war…

This…

This was *golden*!

She hummed easily and nodded, hoping she came off as only barely interested. "I see. This is… certainly an interesting read. How did you come by this information, if I may ask?" she said, reaching towards the projection to move it onto other information. He shut the projector off and withdrew his hand, much to her disappointment. So much had been there just on that initial glance. What else had he gotten for them too? This was better than they could have *hoped* for. They had to get that disk.

"Well," he said, as if contemplating whether he should tell her or not. He eventually decided to, apparently, as he continued a few seconds later. "Last week a very *ambitious* and clever slicer managed to get a worm on Palpatine's comm. He most certainly went on about it later and how he had no way of knowing how much information was compromised. I thought it a clever idea, so I commissioned one of my own."

Siri just blinked at him.

"That worm… was yours?" She wanted to burst into laughter, because the irony… the poetic justice…

The Force was laughing at them.

He smirked. "So, you heard of it?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to open her mouth.

His smirk widened. "I wasn't able to get as much as I would have liked, but I still got some rather incriminating evidence. Combine that with some instructions he's sent me and we have achieved our goal. I just need to get it to Lars."

She still almost couldn't believe this and found she could only sort of sit there, incredulous as she tried to maintain her persona. Eventually, she leaned back, cocking her head a little. "But why?"

He raised one eyebrow in question.

Siri clarified. "He said you might not be… trustworthy. Why should he trust this? And why bring it to him?"

Dooku rolled his eyes a little. "I may be Fallen, but as of right now my goals remain the same. I want the Sith gone. I trust Lars to take this to the right people. For myself, I will have to disappear. Sidious will know where this information came from. But then, it's in the nature of the Sith to betray each other."

Her nigh elation almost evaporated at that. He'd just counted himself among the Sith… The Sith he said he wanted to destroy… She found that chilling, sad, and more than a little worrisome.

"Well, I will have to pass this on, then," she said, stretching a little.

To her annoyance, Dooku just snorted derisively. "Ms. Zora, you act

very well, but you can drop it. You're working with Lars, not for him."

Her smile faded ever so slightly as she considered how to play this now. Dooku hadn't made any sort of threatening move towards her, but he had called her bluff – a very good bluff, if she might add – just after he had outed himself as a Sith. Before she could think of something to answer, he leaned forward, curiously.

"What did he offer you? Training? You're certainly more controlled than a wild or typically rogue Force user. Is Vader starting his own little group of Force Sensitives?"

It took every ounce of self control Siri had regained to not panic right then and there. He knew. He knew about Anakin (well, Lars) being Vader. Her mind ran over the implications. Was he here to out Anakin? Capture him? Or was this simply a dark-sider power play (they did so like to do that)? Or…

Was he warning her that Sidious knew?

She dropped her playfully bored persona completely and sat back with her arms crossed, eyeing the man carefully, hand only centimeters away from her hidden lightsaber.

Eventually, she decided on a vague form of the truth. "He isn't teaching me anything. Our alliance is one of convenience." And friendship, but Dooku didn't need to know that. "However," she conceded, "he did help me out of some… tough spots. I'm here to return a favor." All technically true, even if she didn't *actually* owe him anything. The favor was mostly for her Obi-wan.

After a moment, she shrugged. "The paycheck isn't so bad either." May as well reinforce that.

"These past 'tough spots'," the Count said slowly, stroking his beard (she was thankful it somehow looked more sinister on him than it ever could on Obi-wan). "Would they be where you both met your Anakin?"

She narrowed her eyes in warning. That was getting far too close to dangerous territory.

"My past is my own. So is his," she responded. She hadn't realized he'd picked up quite so much from their little run-in when she'd stopped Anakin from tearing him apart with the dark side.

Dooku just raised an eyebrow again. "This Anakin wouldn't happen to have the last name of Skywalker, would he?"

Siri seriously contemplated taking her lightsaber out right then and there. She almost did, but only stopped herself from doing so when she realized she still sensed nothing offensive from Dooku.

"How do you know that?" she practically hissed.

He smiled. "What would you say if I told you he was alive?"

That took Siri aback and she just sort of stared at him in shock as she tried to process that because… *what*?!

He seemed to take her befuddlement as shock because he grinned smugly.

"I could tell you he's currently in the Jedi Temple," he went on nonchalantly. "This boy whose life was cut so tragically short."

Several more seconds of staring later, Siri finally put the pieces together. Dooku thought she and 'Vader' had come across Anakin at some point, that he was connected to them somehow, and that they thought he'd died when he actually hadn't. He thought they didn't know he was alive and living as a Jedi initiate.

To be fair, she *had* mentioned his name before in front of Dooku. Apparently, the man hadn't realized she'd been *addressing* Anakin.

Yeah, this was too much for her right now.

"I'll… be right back," she finally said, struggling to keep a hold of herself as she rose from the table and forced herself to calmly walk outside.

She waited until she'd walked several feet from the entrance, made sure she couldn't be seen by any holo, flipped off her jammers, and then finally let it out. She burst into long, loud, hearty laughter that may or may not have been a little hysterical. This… this was so far beyond what they could have possibly imagined.

"Siri?" Anakin's voice came through her comm. "That is you, correct?"

She couldn't answer, still laughing, almost bent over and holding her stomach. She did manage to shoot a look in his general direction and nod.

Several locals were looking at her strangely, but she didn't care. She couldn't care. And she couldn't seem to stop.

That's when 'Luke Lars' appeared before her, confused and possibly a little worried. "Siri?"

She laughed harder.

It took her a couple of minutes to calm down enough to explain everything to Anakin in a hushed tone. She made sure to turn her jammer back on and look away from where prying eyes could potentially see or overhear any information she gave before she half whispered, half hissed an explanation to him, still trying to hold in her laughter. She told him about Dooku's new status first. It went a long way to helping her calm down. But then she told him about the worm, and finally Dooku's deductions about 'Anakin Skywalker'.

His very wrong, but still oh-so-right-from-a-certain-point-of-view deductions.

Anakin just stood there in a sort of shocked silence for several seconds before he burst into laughter too, dragging her right back into a fit of her own. The two of them just stood there, in the back alleyway of a Coruscanti diner, drawing far too much attention from the locals and not being able to care one whit.

She managed to calm down faster this time, which helped Anakin do so as well; a very good thing because now they had to plan how they would approach this, and they would have to do so while maintaining the current status quo with the Sith Lord.

Before they really got into it, though, Anakin turned to her and shook his head. "Am I the only one who thinks the Force is laughing at us?"

Siri burst into laughter again.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thanks to Carradee, Quathis and Khalthar for their help on this! :D

I have this image in my head of Anakin in his 'Lars' disguise and Siri in her 'Zora' disguise leaning against some gratified wall in lower Coruscant laughing their heads off... Next chapter likely

won't be so amusing though. :/

Speaking of, I'm moving and going on a trip out of state for Hubby's family and between all of that, I may not be able to post next month. I will try and get the next chapter up on time, but no promises. Depends on how overwhelmed I am and how badly my anxiety acts up.

In any case, thank you for reading!

Discord: discord.gg/2acAymzqku

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Siri still hadn't gotten over her amusement at the entire situation and Dooku's conclusions, even as she had Anakin say his line again.

"No," she shook her head, "you need to really *feel* it. Righteous anger here. I *know* you can do that."

She couldn't see the deadpan expression he shot her, but she certainly felt it, and that caused her to stifle another giggle.

"And how exactly are you going to play this off?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Shock and anger, much like you, probably some worry… but if you don't feel it, Dooku won't sense it and he won't believe it."

Anakin's sat there for several seconds, studying her through that blank mask of his before finally nodding. "Very well."

He delivered his line.

Siri smiled. "Now *that's* more like it. Again!"

xXx

Anakin practically barged into the diner, striding up to Dooku's table, Siri wringing her hands behind him.

"What do you *mean*, he's *alive*?!" he practically hissed – almost shouted.

Dooku just looked up, a little smug. It was far too familiar of an expression on him and it sent shivers down Anakin's spine. This wasn't the Dooku from his memories – likely could never be, now – but he was too close for comfort.

"Ah, Mr. Lars. Please, have a seat. Your… assistant's food has already come," he gestured to the table and all of the dishes currently on it.

"She'll get it to go," Anakin said as he sat across from Dooku.

"I want to know too," she protested, sounding offended. "This isn't something you can just cut me out of, Lars."

"I'm the one writing your paycheck," he responded coldly, trying to channel his inner Vader without actually allowing it to drag him down. It was a… fine line to walk.

"He saved *my* life too," she returned angrily.

Anakin paused, as if thinking for a moment before turning slowly – hopefully it came off as hesitant – to Dooku.

"How did he survive?"

Dooku just shrugged his shoulders. "I wouldn't know. I know precious little about the boy, except that he is now studying in the Jedi Temple. He was taken as an initiate."

Anakin paused again, as if blinking or processing. "He would have had to be… at least nine if…" he faded off. They hadn't really had time to come up with an actual story, so he just avoided it as Siri had suggested. Too bad they'd only had a few minutes to practice this… and he was glad they'd even taken the time to go over potentials and craft reactions at all. Still, Siri was better at this and he couldn't help but be a little jealous.

He just had to be good enough, though.

"That's too old, isn't it?" Siri asked, sounding surprised herself. Then she looked at Anakin accusingly. "Or is my information incorrect?"

Dooku chuckled a little. "Oh, no. It's correct. He was… an exception, to my understanding." Then he glanced at Anakin. "Had you been planning on training him?"

The gleam in the man's eyes had Anakin bristling.

"Or had you already started training, I wonder?" Dooku went on. "Although, from what I understand, he was a slave. Why did you not simply take him?"

Anakin swallowed. This was getting into unfamiliar territory very quickly. "I… had my reasons," he finally said, hoping that was good enough. He felt a ping of reassurance from Siri and that helped. More than he would like to admit.

Dooku snorted. "I'm sure you did. Well, either way, I thought you'd want to know."

Anakin frowned and crossed his arms. "Why?" he asked.

Before the Count could answer, a server came up to them. "Is… there a problem here?" she asked.

Looking around, Anakin realized several people were watching them suspiciously. Thankfully, he and Siri had turned their jammers on before coming into the diner and they were still far enough away from the other guests that someone overhearing them would be unlikely (Dooku may very well have paid for that, and if he had, Anakin approved). Still…

"I'm fine," Siri finally said firmly. "We all are."

The waitress glanced at the other two at the table and received two nods before she hesitantly backed down.

"If you're sure…" she said slowly.

"We are," Siri replied. "May I get a chair? I don't like sitting next to people if I can help it." She gestured to the booth.

The server still looked hesitant, but nodded and turned to walk away. Siri remained standing, but gave her attention back to the Count.

"He had a valid question," she said sternly. "Why tell us about… him?"

Dooku's smug smirk returned. "Two reasons. First, to draw you out, Lars."

Anakin didn't respond, but he did clench his fists.

"Second… a certain person is interested in him. Apparently, the boy is rather strong. It explains why he was taken into the temple at such an old age, I suppose." Although Dooku didn't look happy about that… actually seemed quite bitter. About Anakin in general? Or about the Temple breaking rules? Didn't he *want* the temple to break rules? Or change them?

Then again… that could be the dark side working on him. One thing Anakin remembered from the Clone Wars was how calm and together Dooku had seemed. At a glance, few would think the man had changed at all. The same applied now, except Anakin could sense an

underlying storm. It had been something he could sense with the Dooku he remembered as well. Only now could he recognize how strong the man's mask was to hide as much as it did.

The server came back with Siri's chair and she took it with a smile and a nod before sitting at the edge of the table. He could understand why she would want that. She wouldn't want Anakin to be trapped, but she certainly wouldn't want to sit next to Dooku. She'd definitely reached a good solution.

Thankfully, the interruption broke the heavy silence.

"Then the solution is simple," Anakin finally said once the server had left, making sure to sound as firm as he could. "Zora said you have something for me?"

Dooku smiled and set the data disk on the table. "I think you'll find a good deal on there."

Anakin stared at the disk for a couple of seconds. Such a small thing that held such large implications. After a long moment, he reached out with the Force and felt nothing sinister from the disk. Carefully, he reached out with his mechanical hand and took it, then hid it away under his tunic. He'd check it for trackers and booby-traps later.

The Count stared very neutrally at Anakin for several seconds. "Don't let this go to waste," he finally said, then (much to both Anakin and Siri's surprise) went to get out of the booth.

"Dooku," Anakin said before he stood. The Count paused and the booth fell into an awkward silence as Anakin tried to think of what he wanted to say. He had a billion questions. How had the former Jedi resisted so long? Why did he still want to bring down the Sith? Why was he there, still working against Sidious?

Was it worth it…? His Falling. His joining a group he'd actively worked to destroy. Had this been how Dooku had felt in the previous timeline or had Anakin's arguments helped at all?

But there was too much context there, and he did not have the time or inclination to explain.

So he asked a question every Sith would understand.

"Who… did you kill?" he asked.

The man stiffened, looking straight ahead, not focusing on either Anakin or Siri. It took him almost an entire minute to answer.

"He captured one of my former padawans," he finally said, voice low, not looking at the other two. "She was insane – driven mad by the dark side, just as you said. What she'd done… her fate was not undeserved. It was likely a mercy as much as anything… and yet…"

It was still murder.

Then Dooku finally looked back at him, and for a moment his face seemed so utterly heartbroken that Anakin almost wanted to cry.

"I believe it is only fair I ask you the same thing."

Anakin felt his breath catch in his throat and he instantly regretted asking… because Dooku was right. Turn about is only fair play. He did not want to think back on it… did not want to speak of it at all… and yet, he'd painted himself into this corner. He would have to paint himself out of it.

He looked away. "My whole family, more or less. Men, women, children…"

Master Skywalker! There are too many of them! What are we going to do?!

He felt Siri kick him lightly under the table and looked over to see her own sad but accepting expression. He smiled at her, sending his appreciation through the bond. Then he looked back to see Dooku watching him, face unreadable.

"Sith truly are a sorry lot," the old man commented quietly.

Anakin nodded in mirthless agreement.

Another couple of awkward moments of silence before Dooku spoke again, turning his whole body to more comfortably face Anakin, frowning in puzzlement.

"My name, on the boards we message to set up meetings– Tyra. You knew, didn't you? What he would name me."

Anakin… hadn't realized something like that would come back to bite him. He probably should have. So many things in this life did.

Finally, he nodded.

Dooku snorted. "That, more than anything else you have said, sells your story to me."

Anakin blinked before he realized Dooku must think he knew because he'd heard Sidious speak about it. To be fair, he had… but…

The older man stood beside the table and made to walk away but Anakin stopped him one last time.

"What will you do now?" he asked.

Dooku put a hand in his pocket, looked as if he were clutching something. "Now I disappear, as I said before. I'll find an uninhabited planet somewhere and strand myself once I have all my affairs in order. I… don't know how much longer I can hold on. You sense it, don't you? That I am hanging on by a thread – grasping for my previous sense of self… just as you said I would."

Anakin felt a lump in his throat and wasn't entirely sure why.

"You… are truly a good man," he finally heard himself say. "Far better than I gave you credit for."

Dooku just snorted. "No, I'm not. Don't look for me. Unlike you, I don't think I can go back."

Anakin disagreed… but he could also sense that Dooku wasn't open to that disagreement. To push him now would just push him down the dark path farther and harder. So he watched the man go, unsure of what to really think. Siri did as well.

He walked out the door, leaving them there.

Eventually, the older Jedi finally turned back to the Initiate in disguise.

"What now?" she asked.

He sighed. "First, we find someone who can take this food." He paused and glanced wryly at her. "Unless you really want to eat it…"

She chuckled dryly. "No. After that… I'm not hungry."

"Agreed," he muttered.

They asked the waitress for a to-go box, gave her the credit chips and a very generous tip before leaving with their box of food. It wasn't

difficult to find a homeless child to give said food to before they returned to the motel room to take off their outfits and double check that Dooku had given them the information and hadn't put a tracker on the system. He had, but one easily found and taken care of. Anakin double checked for others, but found nothing. Siri then checked and found nothing.

That… actually worried both of them.

So they set up a new holomail account and signed up to a secure (Anakin made *sure* of it) data storage site before copying all the information to there. Siri would go over it more thoroughly later. She also sliced into the motel security and wiped all traces of them from the motel recordings before setting a timer for the holo-cams to be shut down at a certain time so they could sneak out.

They then copied the information to another data disk and left the destroyed blank data disk in the motel room, making sure to utterly melt it with their lightsabers and wipe anything else down for their fingerprints.

At the preset time, they left the motel room much as they'd done before (albeit, they left their speeder in a different blind spot, but the result remained the same).

Two hours later, after dropping Anakin's prosthetics off at his storage shed, they made their way back into the temple.

Yoda met them at the doorway.

Both Anakin and Siri paused at his neutral expression (and yet, his ears gave him away, drooping low). Anakin sighed and walked up to the diminutive master.

"Master Yoda," he bowed, "I owe you… an apology. I thought very little of your former Padawan initially. I was wrong. He is…" he looked out over the skyline of Coruscant. "… far stronger than I gave him credit for."

Yoda didn't answer. Instead he just nodded his head and turned to go inside. The other two followed.

"Write a report for me, you should. Go over it later, we will. Now, want to know, you will. News, we have, of Obi-wan's return. Coming into the atmosphere now, he is."

Both Anakin and Siri tripped up a little at that. Then they both reached out in the Force and found Obi-wan far closer than he had been. He was injured – badly, but he was there and he was alive and he was coming back. Anakin let out a breath, feeling his body slump in relief.

"What happened?" Siri asked.

Yoda didn't stop walking. "Attacked they were. By whom, we will not know until landed, they have. Destroyed, their long-distance communication was."

Both Anakin and Siri nodded in acceptance. It would make sense that they would want to report face to face. Especially if their long-distance communication had been knocked out. Short range could get jumbled due to the sheer amount of traffic on Coruscant.

"Is everyone alright?" the taller blond asked worriedly.

Anakin immediately felt bad that he hadn't even thought of the other two Jedi on the ship with Obi-wan. He was even supposed to be *friends* with one of them.

Yoda did stop that time, as if bracing himself for their reaction. That… wasn't good.

"Report, Master Torum did. Hurt, Knight Kenobi is, but alive." He seemed to steel himself for his next words. "As for Padawan Olin… missing, he is. Likely kidnapped by their attacker."

Anakin recoiled in shock. That… how could that happen? He and Obi-wan had been attacked once on a training trip, but Anakin had been fourteen at the time. This… this made *no* sense! Unless…

Hindsight is not perfect, he remembered this younger Obi-wan saying. And he'd known he couldn't ever truly see or comprehend the far-reaching ripple effects of his actions… but still.

Beside him, Siri seemed to be in her own shock, wearing a lost look on her face he hadn't seen for months now. And the worst part was that she hadn't reverted.

She stared at Yoda in horror. "No," she whispered.

"Come," the Grandmaster said. "To the healer's wing, we will go. Wait for news there, you may."

And with that, he turned and began walking down the hall. After exchanging horrified glances, Anakin and Siri followed.

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Obi-wan had been unconscious when brought in, having put himself in a healing trance. That left everything to a very tired Master Tolem to explain. He spoke of how he'd been going through the tracking and training he and Obi-wan had previously laid out before a ship had come with several bounty hunters – just like in Anakin's memory.

Thus had begun a game of cat and mouse. Tolem had tried to rendezvous with the other Jedi, but hadn't made it in time. Between the three Jedi, they'd managed to capture most of the bounty hunters, but it had been trying for everyone involved and they'd had to leave them on the planet as they hadn't had room in their ship. Tolem had been able to save an injured Obi-wan from falling down the side of a cliff, and the knight had been able to tell him only of Ferus' capture and Granta Omega before he had to go into the trance.

It was Anakin's worst fear confirmed.

They were allowed in to see him in the healer's wing, but he didn't stir when they entered. Soon after, Bant herself ushered them out, thanking them for coming with a melancholy expression. Master Yoda, who had accompanied them there, finished explaining what had happened before he to left them alone to attend to his own duties.

Honestly, Anakin was grateful Yoda had explained as much as he had.

Once they were alone, Siri turned to the initiate worriedly.

"Anakin, what's going on?" she asked. "I know you know something…"

The younger time-traveler sighed grimly and nodded. Then he explained everything. She'd already known about Anakin and Obi-wan being attacked by Omega in their previous life, but she hadn't really known the details. She did know that everything that had happened on Korriban with Tru, Darra, Ferus and Anakin had a lot to do with Omega, but again, she hadn't known exactly what had happened.

Anakin explained how Omega was the Force-null son of Xanatos, Qui-gon's Fallen former Padawan. For his own reasons, Omega had decided to carry on his father's revenge against Qui-gon and his latest apprentice, Obi-wan, although he'd claimed many reasons for doing so. The most prominent reason had been Xanatos' death, which he

blamed Obi-wan for, despite the man having committed suicide instead of being arrested.

Omega had been more than a thorn in Anakin's side as he'd grown in the Temple the last time. More than one mission had gone wrong because of the man's involvement, up to and including Korriban.

Once Anakin had finished with the cliff notes, he sighed.

"He shouldn't be here this early," he muttered, realizing they'd wandered the Temple and ended up near Siri's quarters again. Thankfully, they hadn't run into many people. "Omega didn't make an appearance until I was fourteen in the previous timeline. Something we've done has changed his involvement – pushed him to move three years early."

Siri didn't answer, the worry on her face never leaving as she looked up to the ceiling, eyes distant.

Finally, she looked back down at her companion and nodded. "Thank you for telling me."

She didn't ask if they'd get Ferus back or what would happen to him. She knew all too well what could. Anakin also got the distinct sense of feeling trapped from her, and knew she would much prefer to be out there looking for someone she still considered her padawan. Anakin found it both refreshing and heart-breaking to see how much she still cared for Ferus.

"I… think I need some time to myself," she finally said. "We can get started on sorting and compiling Dooku's information tomorrow."

Anakin nodded, completely understanding. He couldn't give her any comfort because he honestly had no clue what would happen and he didn't want to give her false hope.

Siri opened the door to her quarters and went to walk inside, but paused in the doorway before she did.

"Anakin," she said softly, "Obi-wan sent me back with you and I promised him I'd look after you for him. I have no intention of abandoning that mission. *Ever*… for any reason."

She smiled at him – a thin smile hiding so much pain, but one that said she truly meant what she said. Then she disappeared inside her apartment, leaving him staring at her door as it closed.

The realization that she'd just prioritized him over Ferus hit him like a punch to the gut.

She'd prioritized *him* over Ferus.

True, it was because she'd promised his Obi-wan, but…

So few people had ever really prioritized him before. His mother, Padme, Luke… Girth… and now Siri…

He didn't know why he felt his eyes burn in gratitude… but he also knew something else: Siri was hurting because she had prioritized him.

She'd just proved, beyond a doubt, that he was important to her. It… was a gift. A truly wonderful gift. She probably hadn't completely realized how much it meant to him even.

And because of that… he couldn't let that stand.

An idea began to form in his mind, and he turned to make his way to the library, face set in determination.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I kind of feel like the emotion in this is a bit of a roller coaster... but I also feel that that's what life is like and I'm okay with that. Hmm. Thoughts?

Thanks to Quathis and Khalthar for their help on this!

Discord for anyone who's interested: discord.gg/2acAymzqku (as an fyi it isn't a terribly active/involved board, but I'm okay with that too)

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin sat back from his holo-station in the library and took the new data-disk out of its slot. He stared at it sadly for several seconds before he pulled out his comm and checked his chrono. If he got back to the creche now, he would probably have enough time for three hours of sleep before he had to get up in the morning.

He mentally groaned. His young body would not like that.

Still…

He rose and stretched before making his way out of the library, ignoring the disapproving expression on the current librarian's face. At least it wasn't Jocasta Nu herself. That would have made his life infinitely more difficult.

He was also grateful that Siri had gotten him out of needing to return to the creche that evening, citing a mission he'd be involved with. Admittedly, she was also supposed to completely supervise him, never let him out of her sight and walk him back, but they'd both known that was as likely to happen as not.

Anakin would just need to be careful when sneaking back in.

No one was up when he made his way into the creche and tip-toed down the hallway to his own room. He used the small sink inside to brush his teeth and change his clothing before he collapsed onto his bed, exhausted, data disk in hand.

Tomorrow…

Well, he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

That night, he found himself drifting blissfully quickly off to sleep.

He 'woke' to find himself on a planet filled with greenery, and blinked. Then he turned to scrutinize his surroundings when his eyes fell on a burning pyre, a familiar mask melting inside the flames.

Oh. He was on Endor then.

He watched the pyre as it continued to burn, flames leaping into the canopy of the forest, only to snuff out in the damp atmosphere.

Luke was nowhere to be seen, sadly.

"A morbid setting," a new voice commented and Anakin sighed a little, shaking his head. Then he looked over at the man he knew would be standing there. Qui-gon Jinn just stared serenely at the platform in front of them. "But a lovely resting place," the man finally said, looking around at the greenery in appreciation.

Anakin snorted. "About as far from Tatooine as one can get."

He hadn't deserved that.

Then again, he hadn't deserved many things. Still didn't.

Qui-gon sighed, as if reading his thoughts, and confirmed that he indeed had moments later. "You really need to stop that."

Anakin just rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah, I know."

They fell into silence, much to the time-traveler's relief.

"I wanted to thank you," Qui-gon finally said, an indeterminate amount of time later.

Anakin glanced at him, raising one eyebrow in question. "For what?"

"For what you did for my Master. He and I had a… difficult relationship, but we still cared for each other, deeply."

Oh… that. "I'm not sure how much I helped," he admitted, looking back at the mesmerizing fire.

"More than you know," Qui-gon whispered. That actually lifted a weight off of Anakin's chest he hadn't realized was there.

"You're welcome," he finally said. "Although, I didn't do it for you."

The older man shook his head, a sad smile on his face. "I appreciate it nonetheless."

Anakin returned the smile with a nod before turning back to the spectacle of his own death.

"I am also proud of you, when I see how far you've come," Qui-gon

said.

This time Anakin didn't look away from the flames as that little bubble of warmth grew in his chest again. He was getting used to it, but found himself unsure as to whether that was a positive development or not.

"Thank you."

"You are most welcome."

More silence, although this stretch felt more peaceful and relaxing than the previous ones.

"You know, I don't think you've told me all of Obi-wan's anecdotes from when you were his Padawan. I rather enjoyed our last… 'story time'. Would you be willing to speak of that more?"

Anakin blinked and turned to face the Jedi. Then he smiled and nodded.

"Sure."

xXx

It took Anakin longer to sneak out of the Temple than he would have liked the next day, but eventually he did, heading to the nearest international comm channel, dressed in normal upper-middle-class clothing.

He really hoped he didn't get mugged… he wasn't entirely sure he could hold back from simply killing petty criminals and leaving them behind for the sheer sake of time. He had to get back to begin working on that information Dooku had gotten him. If it was indeed what the Count claimed, then it was the key to taking out Palpatine and that should be his priority…

And yet, here he was, going out of his way to rescue a boy whose relationship with Anakin could only ever be described as awkward at best, antagonistic on average and downright murderous at worst.

But he was a fellow Jedi… he was a *kid*. A Force-sensitive kid who had been taken by a very ruthless man. If they were lucky, he'd just kept Ferus around in a prison as he decided what to do with said boy. If they weren't lucky… they'd be looking for a body or a slave. Force-sensitives were a rare commodity on the slave market.

Either way, there really was only one man for the job.

He didn't bother hiding his face as he stepped into the international booth, paid his fee and placed the comm call.

After all, there wasn't anything he had to hide anymore.

He just needed to get this done. Because there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for family…

And Siri was family now.

So he placed the call and had to stop himself from sagging in relief when the guy finally answered.

xXx

Jango Fett sat in the pilot chair of his ship, *Slave 1*, staring at a blank screen; a blank screen linked to his off-net, highly secure computer.

Just a couple of minutes ago, it had been full of the information he'd stolen from the 'long-necks' (as the clones had begun to call them). It hadn't been an easy mission to get said information, but then, it hadn't been *hard* either. At least not as hard as he'd suspected it would be to get to their most private files. (Although it *had* taken some planning and specialized equipment, to be fair.) Then again, who would want to know about the clones right now? So few people even *knew* about Kamino at all, let alone their newest batch of 'merchandise'.

Still, with what he'd found…

His hands curled into fists as he remembered the lines of text that had spelled out, plainly (in *aurebesh* even) about how the Kaminoans hated their status as 'outsiders' and that the 'hypocritical' Republic (well, they weren't *wrong* there at least) wouldn't allow them to join because of the Kaminoans' 'barbaric' (they took high offense to that) practices of cloning, how they'd been approached by someone who had a plan they could benefit from – a plan that could get them into the Republic, with the tax breaks and supposed protection that entailed.

How they were willing to completely wipe the Jedi out for it.

How they were willing (happy to, even) use the 'fodder' (aka clones) as biological robots they could override at any point with the proper codes. How those clones would become the scapegoats and mindless armies the original customer and Kaminoans both wanted.

Basically, he'd been able to confirm more or less everything that Luke Lars had claimed.

And Jango had been completely (if unknowingly) complicit in that.

He may hate the Jedi, but he didn't want every member down to the smallest child wiped out. Maybe some of the older people on the Council, but the children?

And some of the basic plans that had been highlighted using clones…

He'd managed to keep his lunch down out of sheer will at that point. And with everything he'd seen, that said, well… a lot.

So now, here he sat, with a choice to make. He had the information and confirmation, so what did he *do* about it? If he went to the Jedi now –t tried to warn them – what would happen to the clones? They may be replicas of himself, but they were also *blood*. Mandalorian blood and family blood and…

He couldn't see a way out of this. They'd already created over 300,000 clones and had a good 150,000 more growing in tubes. Could he consciously abandon those lives? No. But what could he do with them? The Republic wouldn't take them at this point, and there were just too many to smuggle anywhere…

He found himself stuck between a colliding asteroid and comet. No matter what he did, something would blow up and cause massive damage. And his own choices – his own hatred, to a large extent – had brought him here.

He hadn't meant for this to happen.

And what about Boba… the unaltered clone he already thought of as a son…

Eventually he realized that he was thinking in circles and he'd already been docked at the small way station he'd stopped at to fuel up for too long. He needed to leave.

He could make more concrete plans later.

Jango had just begun the take-off sequence when he got a notification about a message… and an incoming call.

He blinked, then looked to see who it was from.

Well, wasn't that a coincidence.

Kriffing Jedi.

Sighing internally, he reached out and flipped the switch. He needed to talk to the kid anyway.

"What do you want?" he asked shortly as the holo image of a young boy came up.

"I was going to let you come back to me with your answer, whatever it may be, but… something has come up and I have a job for you."

Jango's eyes narrowed. "What kind of a job?"

"Locate and retrieve a missing child – yes, a Jedi – before he's sold into slavery or… worse."

The bounty hunter stayed silent, thinking for several seconds. "I'm listening…"

What had he gotten himself into?

xXx

Siri couldn't seem to stop pacing. Meditating didn't work nearly as well as it should, but she'd tried that for hours this morning anyway. She'd tried releasing her emotions to the Force, but they simply kept coming back. She'd tried to accept what was happening and give her will to the Force, but every time, Ferus' smile crossed her mind and her concentration slipped.

Basically, she hadn't been this much of a wreck since long before she'd gotten out of the healer's wing. But… what was she supposed to do? This was her padawan!

Well, not *her* padawan *right now,* but semantics. She still loved him like a son. She still wanted what was best for him. She still wanted to see him grow into the amazing knight he was always meant to be.

But she couldn't go after him because now she had other obligations*;* obligations that were just as important as Ferus. More so, her mind supplied, but she hated herself for even thinking that. Ferus had been her son and little brother and best friend all rolled into one. She remembered times when they'd be on a mission and had down time, so they'd just sit around talking about the 'hot guys' that walked past

(although apparently they had very different tastes). She recalled all the training they'd gone through together, those times he'd come to her with problems he had no idea how to solve, those times he'd risked so much to save her and, when she'd done everything she could to save him, and… now here she was, doing. Absolutely. Nothing.

"Stick to the plan," she told herself, ignoring her eyes watering. She didn't want to think about the situation at all, to be honest. She knew that Xanatos had been involved in the slaver circle and a Force-sensitive (even worse, a *trained* Force-sensitive) would fetch a very high price. She knew the types of circles that such would be involved in. Powerful people who would want him to sire Force-sensitive children with or without his permission… he would be lucky if he just ended up in some factory somewhere…

"*Don't think about it*," she hissed to herself and angrily wiped the tears away.

But she couldn't help it.

She wanted him home and safe, where he *should* be.

And part of her was very much not happy with Obi-wan. She felt as if she'd *entrusted* her padawan to him (even if he didn't know it) and said padawan had been *kidnapped*. She knew it wasn't his fault – that things happened, no matter the precautions taken. If she really had to make a guess about it, she would think that Ferus had somehow given himself up in place of Obi-wan without the older Jedi knowing, the self-sacrificial brat.

That she already missed *so much*…

Unable to keep it in any longer, she let out a loud sob, wondering where all of the control she'd fought so hard to regain had gone. Or was she still so far gone from her younger and older selves merging that she'd never be able to get it back? Not fully…

Part of her even resented Anakin. It was an old feeling that she'd thought she'd long-since gotten over, but if he hadn't been here in the past, Ferus *would* be here and safe as he had been in the original timeline.

It wasn't fair of her, but she remembered the counsel from Master Xio that she had to acknowledge and allow herself to feel… and honestly, she hadn't really been doing well with that lately. Truthfully, she didn't want to feel the pain of loss all over again. She'd lost him once

before – along with everyone else, and this just brought back all of the memories all over again…

At least she hadn't lost her sense of time. She knew exactly where and when she was, even while finding herself overwhelmed by the pain and loss of the combination of her past and her present. It wasn't *fair*. Not that life was ever fair – especially for a Jedi, but that didn't exactly help at the moment.

She didn't know how long she cried, but the next thing she knew, she felt awareness come to her at the knocking on her door. Blearily, she raised her head and looked around. She'd fallen asleep on the small futon in her room – a very small room filled with only necessities. She'd sort of ended up sprawled across it and her neck certainly felt it.

Groaning, she tried to work out the kink as she got to her feet, massaging it with her hands. Part of her wanted to take on a padawan just so she could have an apartment again. Although, to be fair, she had larger quarters than most knights, with two rooms and a fresher space since she also had to make room for her disguises and such. She had enough room for a small couch she didn't actually like to use but came in handy when she had visitors. She was also lucky to have a very small kitchenette that she could use to warm tea and a couple of meals, but it was still cramped. She'd never *actually* take on the training of someone for such a petty reason, but she did miss her apartments with both her Master and her padawan…

Her padawan who was not her padawan.

Her padawan who was now missing…

The weight of the day before seemed to crash down on her and she slumped down again.

No, she'd cried it all out the night before. She'd allowed herself to do that. Now she'd have to face the day and Anakin and go through the information so they could put a stop to Palpatine and the destruction of the Jedi and hopefully destroy the Sith in the process.

And that was Anakin on the other side of the door. Right.

She squared her shoulders, put on a neutral mask and palmed the door open.

"Hey, you ready?" she asked. "I just woke up. Thought I had some time with your studies today and –"

"Siri," he cut in. She closed her mouth and took a closer look at him. He seemed… determined. She immediately went on alert because determined Anakin usually led to explosions of some kind, be they emotional or physical.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Is it Obi-wan? Is he okay?"

Anakin shook his head. "I stopped by before I came here. He hasn't woken yet."

"Oh," Siri said with a frown, then looked around for her comm and the chrono it had. She'd left it on the small table by her futon. Uncaring as to whether it was frivolous use or not, she used the Force to bring it to her and checked the time. 10:47*. In the morning. What?

She looked up at Anakin with a frown. "Really, shouldn't you be in class? What's going on?" He pulled the strap of a bag off from around his head and shoulder. "I've already packed for you. Dunno if you want to take any of your disguises, but there are basic first aid kits in here, data pads, rebreathers, etc. You'll have to bring your own clothes. Figured that was all personal enough."

She frowned. "Um… thank you… but why?" she asked.

He took a deep breath and held out a data chip. "I spent all night putting everything onto this that I remember about Granta Omega and the corporations he was involved with. I also put everything I knew of and could find about Xanatos. It'll probably be a little jumbled, but it should give you a good start.

"I haven't cleared this with any of the masters, although I did talk to Master Yoda. He wasn't super happy about it, but he also didn't tell me to stop you, so I'm taking it as a win."

"Anakin," she cut in before he could say anything else, "stop. I told you, I'm not going after Ferus." It still killed her to say. "I have to stay here to help you."

He gave her such a soft smile… she wasn't sure she'd ever seen that one on him before. "Thank you," he said, his voice matching his smile perfectly. "I mean it… words cannot express how thankful I am towards you at this moment. You put me before Ferus… your padawan…" his smile faded and he sighed, "and as a former Master myself, I cannot let you do that."

He reached down and grabbed her hand. Shocked at his words, Siri let

him. He put the data chip into her palm and closed her fingers around it.

"Find him. Bring him home; for both your sakes."

Part of her wanted to rush off immediately, thrilled and determined to do just that. But the other part of her just felt sick – felt like she'd be letting Obi-wan down if she did. Felt like she'd be letting *Anakin* down.

"I can't," she said, hating how weak her voice sounded, but she shook her head firmly. "I can't leave you here to face *him* alone. What if something happens?"

He smiled up at her, this time larger and brighter. "I'm not alone. I have Master Yoda, and Master Yaddle, Master Xio, Girth and even Obi-wan… or, I will, once he wakes up. I have all the children I've actually made friends with. Heck, I even have Master Windu to a certain extent." He looked over his shoulder, expression fond and so wholesome – definitely not one she'd ever imagine on a Sith's face.

It suddenly hit her that he wasn't a Sith anymore. Backsliding and dark moments aside, he'd worked hard to come back and thinking of him as even a former Sith at times like these… it was a disservice to him.

Then he turned back, his smile taking on a sad quality. "I spent my first life focusing on others to help myself. I've spent my second life focusing on myself to help others. In that vein, I need to stay here and get that information to the right people. You need to go and find your padawan."

"But so many things could happen while I'm gone," she reiterated.

He looked down for a moment, then back up, smile still in place. "Then you'll have to come back and kick my butt out of whatever I get into. If I need you… I know you'll be there, even if it's after the fact.

"Besides, we have an unblockable bond. I know this is killing you. So let me encourage you to do this one thing for yourself. You aren't breaking any promise to me, or to our Obi-wan. As your friend – as your brother – I'm asking you to please. Go."

She felt tears in her eyes again as she looked down at her hand holding the data chip and realized… he needed her to do this. He needed her there at one hundred percent, not at some sort of

recovering half-present entity in his life. He needed to know he wasn't holding her back just as much as he wasn't holding himself back.

This…

She felt an overwhelming gratitude come over her and another sob escaped her as she rushed forward and engulfed him in a hug.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you, so much."

She felt his relief combined with a swirl of happiness and sadness – of encouragement and heartbreak.

Of wholeness, as if a void inside him had filled, even if only a little.

"You're welcome," he said.

She hugged him tighter for several seconds before stepping back and wiping her tears away *yet again* (this was getting ridiculous). To her surprise, he seemed to have tears in his own eyes, although he didn't even acknowledge them and they didn't fall.

"Oh, also… I've contacted someone to help you. He'll be your ride and probably a huge help… um… if you two can work together." He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

Siri's smile vanished.

"Anakin… who did you get."

"Um… Fett?"

Siri just stared at him for several seconds as her mind worked through that.

Fett who hated Jedi.

Fett the bounty hunter who was the template for the clones.

Fett who worked for Sidious, even if indirectly.

Fett, who happened to be one of the most dangerous people towards Jedi in *the entire galaxy*.

She groaned.

Chapter End Notes

AN: *Using the 00:00 time because Coruscant's time is extremely similar to Earth's.

I'd like to thank Khalthar, Quathis and Hidden50 for their help with this! :D Sorry it's late, that's entirely my own fault, not any of my lovely beta's. Muses are a little taken with another story I'm writing now *shifty eyes* What? Demon Slayer rocks. *ahem* In any case, I'm actually really happy with how this chapter came out. And believe it or not, this is getting closer and closer to my final set up for the end of this book and this arc altogether. :) Super excited after working on this for an entire year.

Also, I'm going to be trying to publish something on Kindle Vella, which is very similar to fanfiction format, so it should be interesting. It's a fun little story that I'd be happy to tell you about if you're interested. Should be publishing that by the end of August (hopefully).

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Siri was gone before mid-meal.

Anakin saw her off and watched her go wondering why he *felt* so much. It was just a mission. Not even that far out of the ordinary, officially sanctioned or not. But watching her leave felt both exhausting and freeing. He felt alone again despite knowing he had his age-mate allies, his therapists, Master Yoda and even Mace Windu of all people. He still felt as if a crutch he'd come to lean on had been yanked out from under him, despite knowing that Siri was most certainly *not* a crutch. It was… hard to see her go, not knowing when she'd return, but he knew he'd done the right thing by giving her the push to find Ferus.

He remembered feeling similarly about Obi-wan on more than one occasion during the Clone Wars. The feeling itself brought back more nostalgia than he could have anticipated and he remembered how much he'd cared for Obi-wan, despite everything. He'd thought of his old master as an older brother and even a father at times… and he felt similarly about Siri now. Not exactly the same, but he'd probably have to go over that on his own or with his therapists to really figure it out.

A saying from his mother came to mind as Siri's transport to Fett's rendezvous finally disappeared into the bustling traffic of planet.

Love hurts, Ani. If you love, it will *bring you pain somehow, as that is the very nature of it. But love is a wonderful, mysterious force in and of itself. A life without it is dull, meaningless and no life at all.*

In this one fact, he hated that she was right.

Sighing, he turned to go back inside the temple and paused when he looked up at the enormous doors. It was a familiar sight, one he'd seen hundreds of times before and yet…

He'd dealt with so much of his past that he'd thought he would no longer get harsh reminders or flashbacks, at least not of the Jedi Temple… but, for some reason, right then, the memory of him walking up the steps as the light of the sunset faded, lightsaber out and so many brainwashed troops following behind him flashed

through his mind.

Anakin let out a breath and closed his eyes.

"My name is Anakin Skywalker. I am currently eleven years old in the Jedi Temple, Year 970 RR." Only eleven years before the formation of the Empire…

No, that wouldn't happen this time. He would absolutely make sure of it! Even if the Republic fell, it would not be replaced by that government that put forth such a farce of peace.

He took another breath and began the process of releasing his emotions to the Force. Only a couple of seconds into that, a familiar voice clearing their throat alerted him to a presence approaching him. Anakin set that aside and made sure to finish letting his fear and regret go, reminding himself of when and where he was twice more before he opened his eyes to see the temple Grandmaster standing before him.

"Master Yoda," he said with a slight bow.

Yoda blinked, cocking his head to one side. "Gone, she has, then?"

Anakin sighed a little. "Yeah."

"Hmm. Hope, I do, that return soon with young Olin, she will."

The time-traveler nodded, glancing over his shoulder at the familiar Coruscant horizon line. "As do I."

"Hmm," Yoda said as Anakin turned back to him. The smaller being studied the larger for several seconds before he nodded and shifted to go back into the depths of the temple. Somehow, Anakin felt as if he'd just passed a test…

Before he could ask, though, the diminutive Master spoke up. "Come. No classes, you have. Excused you, I did. Help you, I will."

The blond boy blinked. "Excused? What? Why?"

Yoda simply chuckled in that humming laugh of his and glanced up at his companion. "Have much information to go through, do you not?"

Oh.

Right.

"Yes," he said slowly. "But even if I take classes off, it could be weeks before we get something concrete together. I haven't even looked at the information."

Yoda chuckled again. "Need those classes, do you? Fall behind, will you? Too much work, hmm?"

Anakin's expression dried out. "No."

The little, green troll just shrugged. "Then see no problem, I do. Good, those classes are for you. Force you to talk with others, they do. But a break, you can take."

That took the time-traveler back a bit and he paused in his stride. "Are you telling me you keep me in those classes for social interaction?"

A humming chuckle met his ears. "Mmm, partially. Need it, you did. In many ways, you still do."

Anakin snorted.

"Did Siri put you up to this?"

"She did not. Want to expose our enemy, I do. Protect the Jedi, we will."

The initiate felt himself softening a little. Protecting someone or something dear to him was certainly something he could understand.

"Well, then. Would you like a ride so we can arrive faster?"

Yoda snorted. "So impatient."

Anakin smiled, but it felt bittersweet. "No, I just know what we're up against."

Beside him, the Grandmaster paused and looked up, ears perked as he thought over that. "Hmm. Correct you are. Waste more time, we should not. Accept your offer, I do, hmm?"

The initiate rolled his eyes good-naturedly before he turned and knelt down, waiting for Yoda to climb on and situate himself. Once the old Jedi had settled, Anakin stood and began his stride towards the lifts.

"I… appreciate the help," he said slowly as the door to the nearest lift opened and he aimed for that. A couple of knights stepped out, eyeing Anakin and Master Yoda in surprise before shaking their heads fondly,

then turning and going on their way. Anakin wondered what the scuttlebutt around the temple would be after this.

"Welcome, you are," the Grandmaster said warmly.

They rode the lift in a pleasant silence for a couple of minutes before arriving. Once the door slid open, Anakin set off towards the crèche. He hadn't gone far before Master Yoda stopped him.

"Have the information, do you?" he asked.

Anakin paused. "Yes. I got it from Siri before she left."

He felt the old Master nod. "Then to the library we should go."

The time-traveler frowned. "It's a little public…"

"Have special clearance, I do. A private room, we can get."

Anakin thought about it, then nodded. "A good idea," he said before turning and heading off towards the library.

He both was and wasn't looking forward to this… but no matter what they came across, they'd have a long day ahead of them.

xXx

There was, indeed, a *lot* of information to go through. So much so that Anakin thought his initial estimate of weeks may be understating it all. Still, as mind-numbingly boring as some of the information could be, he and Yoda plowed on, sharing a computer with different terminals that allowed them to collaborate. They'd begun to sort different documents into different folders, making notes of each one in a separate document, whether they saw something interesting or not.

Some of the numbers would need some seriously close scrutiny to find anything, but as an initial run-through, they really just wanted to get everything organized, making sure to put copies in multiple places in case it could be useful for different reasons.

Master Yoda insisted on an index, despite the search option built into the programs they used.

Times like this, Anakin really missed both Obi-wan and Padmé. They'd been far more patient about things like this.

The next couple of days were lost in a bit of a haze as Anakin and

Master Yoda continued on their self-made mission. Both of them made sure the other ate (the Grandmaster insisting they go to the cafeteria, as it allowed them some small breaks and exercise) and slept, but other than that, they devoted their time to their research and only spoke of what they found.

It took Anakin a little while to realize that Master Yoda must have canceled any and all classes he'd been scheduled to teach and he hadn't gone to a single Council meeting since they began to go through everything. His respect for the old master went up several notches then. Yoda had his faults. He was sapient and mortal (no matter how much longer than humans his species tended to live) and thus was not perfect. However, once he set his mind on something, he dedicated himself to it one hundred percent, and he could prioritize what really mattered.

The day of Anakin's next therapy session arrived, this one with Girth, and the initiate found himself wondering if he should cancel it in favor of continuing to go through the information. He voiced his concern to the Grandmaster.

"Hmm," Master Yoda said thoughtfully when Anakin asked for his opinion on the matter. "Go, you should. Take the night off, you should."

The time-traveler blinked. For some reason, he hadn't expected that. "But, Master Yoda, we still have so much to go through…"

The old Jedi shook his head. "Made good progress, we have. However, much information there is. Hurt, one night off, will not. Besides, long has it been since sneaked out at night, you have… hmm?"

Anakin winced at that. No, he hadn't gone racing in… almost two weeks now. Bleersh was probably beside himself. But more than that…

"You… knew?"

The Grandmaster chuckled. "Yes. Confront Knight Tachi about it, I did. Assured me, she did, that necessary, it was, and that hurting or endangering anyone besides yourself, you were not. Confront your Mind-Healers, I did. Assured me, they did, that necessary, it was. Planned to confront you about it, I did, but never a good chance, did I have."

Anakin stared at the little, green troll, washed blue in the light of the

holo-computer, for several seconds.

"You're… okay with it?" he asked.

Yoda harrumphed. "Okay with it, I am not! But listen to your mind-healers and friends, I will. Still," he hopped down off of his chair and hobbled over to Anakin, who just watched him curiously, "put yourself in danger unnecessarily, you should not! Important, you are!" He punctuated each word with a soft jab of his gimmer stick.

Anakin sighed. "Yeah, I know. I have so much information and knowledge of the future that—"

"No!" Master Yoda interrupted striking his stick on the ground and frowning, his ears down and forward, a position Anakin hadn't seen them in often. "Important, you are, because alive, you are. Important you are, not for this," he pointed at Anakin's head with his gimmer stick, "but for this." He moved his stick down to point at Anakin's chest.

"Know this, you do, but believe it, you do not. So, say it, I will, until believe it, you do!"

It wasn't a new concept. Anakin knew that. He knew he still had the slave mentality of having to earn his right to live and love and be happy, but he was working on it, and having yet another person – someone whose opinion he did value (despite himself) – say it so blatantly, helped.

He smiled. "Thank you, Master Yoda… although I don't know if I can stop racing. I truly love it." It just felt so… *good* and so *free*. He anticipated that sense of danger and of overcoming the challenges it presented…

"Hmm," the Grandmaster replied, not looking happy. Then he shook his head. "Listen to your mind-healers, I will… but ask you, I do, to remember this: Missed, you would be, if happened, something did."

Anakin stared at Master Yoda for several seconds, wondering why those words felt so… heavy. But before long, the old Jedi shook his head again.

"Enough, we have done, for today."

"Oh," Anakin replied. "Um…" he was still uneasy about leaving everything and taking a break. But, he also knew that working so

obsessively on this task, as he had, led to mistakes and overlooking information. Yet another thing his time as Vader had taught him.

Still… he also knew to dismiss Master Yoda's wisdom only at his own risk.

"Let me finish this section," he suggested.

"Five minutes, you have," Master Yoda said wryly before hopping back up onto his seat to reach a good stopping point himself. They were going through shipping manifests at the moment, and sorting them into different categories of time, length, destination, departure, stops along the way and any problems each vessel had encountered. Anakin had almost finished with the folder he'd been working on, having been sorting all the information in it for a while.

A little over four minutes later, he shut his station down and stretched. Master Yoda had already done the same and seemed perfectly fine in waiting for Anakin to move first.

Before he stood, the time-traveler looked over at the old Jedi, studying him for several seconds.

"Master Yoda, I do have a question I would like to ask you," he said quietly.

The little being nodded. "Ask you may, although answer, I may not."

Of course. Anakin expected no less. Still, he was curious.

"The changes, in the Jedi Order – bringing in the corps for the younglings, allowing the Masters to take on more than one apprentice… I've even noticed that some of the younger classes have scheduled more field-trips to different places on Coruscant and even other planets in the core. None of this happened last time… I am surprised these changes were even considered.

"I can only assume that my presence caused the changes in one way or another… but I cannot, for the life of me, figure out how or why."

Yoda's smile looked particularly gentle as he observed Anakin.

"A blessing, your presence is," he finally said. "A boon and a chance. See this, we did not, until take us to task, your mind-healer did." He chuckled.

Anakin blinked. "You mean to say that a non-force-sensitive drall who has devoted his life to helping children overcome trauma changed the Council's view?"

The Grandmaster smiled and rested his chin on his gimmer stick. "An outside view, he has – one we were not used to, but one we respected nonetheless. Made us step back and view ourselves in a new light, he did. As did you."

Anakin frowned. "Me? Surely not. I was nothing but a determent to the Order last time."

"Doubt that, I do," Yoda said, his voice almost… dry? Anakin didn't know Yoda could *do* dry. It was… more than a little surprising. However, before his brain could catch up with the situation, the diminutive being continued.

"Positive, I am, that changed, in your last life, the Order did. Not enough, it was. Your fault, that was not."

It *felt* like Anakin's fault, but when he examined that emotion, the initiate realized Master Yoda was correct. He made a mental note to bring that up in his mind-healing session that evening.

"Wanted to be better, this time, you did. Tried to change things, you did. Saw this, we did, even if understand it, we did not. Part of the reason we sought Healer Girth, it was." His smile widened and his eyes seemed to sparkle a little in mirth at he looked so fondly at Anakin, even knowing his dark past. It wasn't an expression the former Sith expected anyone who knew who he had been to give him. He found it confusing but also… warm and welcoming. He was thankful, he realized. Thankful for Master Yoda's understanding and realizing how rare such understanding was in the universe.

"Simple, it was, for you to *try*," the Grandmaster continued, "but not easy. Yet persisted, you did. Changed the world, it did, simply because want it to be better, you did."

"But… I changed so little back then..."

Yoda's smile widened. "Matter, intentions do."

Anakin was… well, shocked. He couldn't seem to form coherent sentences when the Grandmaster laid everything out like that.

Eventually, all he could really force himself to say was, "I… thought

there was no 'try'."

The old Master gave another humming chuckle as he shook his head fondly. "Need that perspective, many do. Most who grow up in the temple, in fact. But help you, right now, it will not. So, Anakin Skywalker, ask you I will: Continue trying, will you?"

Why did he almost feel like crying?

Stupid, hormonal pre-teen body. That was why.

Still…

"Yes," he choked out, hoping the older Jedi wouldn't direct attention towards his rough voice.

"Then enough, it will be."

Those words, somehow, did more for him than just about anything else anyone could have said at that moment. Because he didn't *feel* like enough. He could only try and there had never been any guarantee that he would succeed. Quite the opposite, in fact.

And yet, Yoda believed in him. Believed in him *just trying*…

He felt as if a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders, one he hadn't realized he'd been carrying.

He couldn't bring himself to say anything – couldn't trust himself with his childish brain and body to not make a fool of himself. So he just watched Master Yoda hop down from his chair again and begin to hobble towards the door. Before he got far, though, he turned to look at Anakin over his shoulder.

"Carry too much, you do. Chosen one or not, human you are. Expect more, you should not."

Anakin managed to smile at that as he rose to his feet to follow Yoda out of the room, grabbing the ever precious data disk on the way out.

"Easier said than done," he replied, softly.

Yoda smiled. "Then try, you should. Believe you will succeed, I do."

The smile that came to his lips felt so utterly real that he almost couldn't imagine any other expression there. Nothing else would be remotely right and it almost felt like nothing could take its place. He

knew that thought to be naive, but he reveled in it nonetheless.

"Thank you, Master" he said softly.

As he thought back on the conversation something occurred to him.

"This is the most forward I've ever heard you speak, Master," he said as the doors to the room closed behind them.

"Hmm. Exhausting, it was. Get used to it, you should not."

Anakin actually laughed at that. "So you'll go back to being the typical old, cryptic Jedi Master.

A quirk of the smaller being's mouth. "Perhaps."

The time-traveler rolled his eyes, but still couldn't stop smiling. He liked this Yoda and wished he'd gotten to see this side of the Grandmaster in his previous life. How different would hat have made everything?

"Off you go," Master Yoda said as they approached the Library exit. "Enjoy yourself, you should. See your friends, perhaps? Or visit Knight Kenobi?"

All good ideas. So he nodded at the old Jedi. "Yes, Master. Thank you."

xXx

Three days before

The first thing Siri did when she reached the rendezvous was take a deep breath and release her anxiousness to the Force. She wasn't happy to work with Fett, but she did trust Anakin (and wasn't that a surprise for the records), and he trusted Fett to be a professional. If he accepted the job, he'd follow through. That was what the Fetts strove to do. Or maybe Mandalorians in general. At least, according to Anakin.

In any case, she clutched her bag and her data chip tightly as she sat down at the specified diner in the spaceport and tapped her finger in the pre arranged code. She ordered a light drink, as that was all she thought she could stomach at the moment, and then waited.

It didn't take long for Jango Fett to take the seat across from her.

"Tachi?" he asked.

"Fett," she replied coolly, but made sure to nod respectfully.

He studied her closely for almost a minute, and she did the same right back. Both of them knew enough about the other to realize the kind of threat they posed, but Fett had come without half of his arsenal or his helmet – which was as much of a show of peace as he would offer if she knew Mandalorian culture at all. In return, she made sure not to reach for her lightsaber and to keep her body language calm and relaxed.

She didn't *look* like a Jedi right now, dressed as a normal spacer in pants, a long-sleeved shirt and a poncho. She didn't have typical Jedi boots, but those that laced up firmly and had durasteel toes. She hadn't bothered to change anything else about her appearance, though. She knew where to get a wig and makeup if she needed to go under cover, but doing anything else would make Fett suspicious, and that was the last thing she wanted right now.

It was hard not to really react to him though. She'd worked with so many men with his face… she'd *trusted* them, and part of her wanted to trust him for that reason. Part of her screamed at his own obvious distrust, and the rest of her was just wary. Bounty hunters were mercenaries and only held allegiance to money.

Well, that wasn't *entirely* true, but it was a good general rule, and she'd thought it certainly held true for what she knew about the man sitting in front of her.

"So, do you have any information to go off of?" he asked after over a minute of complete silence.

"I was given this," she set the data chip down on the table, "this morning. I haven't had a chance to look at it."

"What are we working with?" he asked.

She frowned and glanced around pointedly.

"Jammer," he said with a shrug. "Just talk quiet."

She sighed and leaned forward, deciding that arguing with him about that wasn't worth it. She had a feeling there would be many similar instances in the coming days.

"Granta Omega. He attacked a friend of mine and took his padawan, leaving him in critical condition. He was brought back by a fellow

Jedi which is the only reason we know what happened. Even then, we don't know the details.

"All I know is that I'm not going back without that boy."

Fett looked simultaneously suspicious and curious. "That doesn't seem very… Jedi of you."

She raised an eyebrow, puzzled. "Why do you say that?"

He shrugged. "Detachment and all that."

Siri sighed. "It's true that Jedi aren't encouraged to form attachments. Discouraged, really, and for good reason." She looked down at the data disk, hoping it would lead her to Ferus. "That doesn't mean it doesn't happen."

Realization came into his eyes. "Which is why you need *my* help. You can't go through normal Jedi means because this isn't backed by your Council."

Well, he wasn't *entirely* wrong. "They know about it," she said with a nonchalant shrug, "and wisely chose not to stop me. I would have liked to see any of them try." Because once she decided to go, well, she would have found a way through the entire Council if she'd had to.

Briefly, she wondered what her Ma… Adi thought of this, but quickly shook that thought away. No point in dwelling on that now.

"In any case," she said as she sat forward, "I won't lie to you. I have little idea of where to go currently, and will need a little time to go through everything. I figured you'd want to look through this as well."

He rubbed his chin as he gazed down at the data chip. Then he shook his head. "Later. If we're looking for Omega, I have some contacts I want to get in touch with first."

She couldn't help but be a little surprised, but figured he was a bounty hunter, and a good one at that. He had to have a network. So she nodded and grabbed the data chip, slipping it into the pouch under her poncho.

They sat there for a couple more seconds before the waitress came by to give Siri her drink. She asked if Jango wanted anything, but he declined. Siri frowned as the girl left, wondering why they were still

sitting there instead of heading off to his ship or whatnot.

"I'm getting paid for this," he said suddenly. "Decent pay, albeit lower than my normal rates, but I took this job for other reasons." He leaned forward on his elbows and Siri watched him warily. He wanted something else? Did he want access to the Temple or maybe some other information? She didn't reject him insantly, but she did tense a little, her hand twitching for her lightsaber.

He took her silence as permission to continue (or perhaps would have continued anyway, it was, after all, Jango Fett) and his familiar, brown-eyed gaze met hers.

He isn't Macro, she told herself firmly.

"How much do you know about the plan I was hired as a… template for?" he asked slowly.

Siri's breath caught in her chest for just a moment. "Enough," she answered, ready to move if she had to.

Jango looked around cautiously. "I want to stop it," he finally said.

At that, the Jedi could only blink because… *what?*

"Why?" she asked.

He shook his head and put his own data disk on the table. Her eyes widened, than narrowed in puzzlement. "That's everything I could find about it. My price for this information is clemency for my… my children."

Her eyebrows rose almost to her hairline and she glanced between him and the chip incredulously. "How… many?" she croaked.

"Currently, about 450,000, but they're done with the preliminary tests, finally have all of the equipment ready for mass production and 500,000 more are on schedule to begin growth this week, 1,000,000 more next week, and 2,000,000 a week after that across thirty five different sites all over Kamino. Next year, once this 'batch' is finished, they plan on raising that to 3,500,000. Seven weeks in a month, ten months in a year… you do the math."

He suddenly looked down, eyes grim. "In ten years, there should be well over a billion clones, all grown as soldiers to fight and die for the greediness of those who want power…

"And I was too blind to see it."

It took Siri several seconds to fully wrap her head around what this man was asking.

"You… want me to help you stop the Kaminoans from making clones?"

He slumped slightly, looking defeated and a little desperate and all the more dangerous for it. "I don't know," he replied quietly. "I… just don't want them to be grown and used like robots or manikins or just canon fodder, without any regard for their own lives. Just because they can be grown doesn't make them any less precious."

And suddenly, Siri could see why Anakin trusted this man. He was a mercenary who had his own code and morals, he was exceedingly dangerous and *very* good at what he did… but he wasn't the monster she'd come to see the man as. He'd hated Jedi and he'd been part of the plan that led to their downfall. His own DNA had been used to grow the army that destroyed the republic, and she knew he'd been complicit… but perhaps not as complicit as it had seemed.

Maybe, just maybe, she could work with him.

"I'll help," she said, determined. "We can discuss ideas and come up with a plan to save *all* of… your children."

He blinked, then frowned skeptically. "Just like that?"

She shrugged. "I don't want the war to happen at all, and I value life – all life. I promise I will do everything I can to help you find a way to rescue the clones."

He just stared at her, looking almost incredulous. "You really mean that."

She nodded firmly.

"Huh. Okay, let's find your boy, then."

With that, he rose to his feet and Siri followed. The way he acted as they made their way through the spaceport, though... well, she was pretty sure she hadn't been the only one at that table who had needed to re-evaluate their worldview.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thank you once again to Quathis, Khalthar and Hidden50 for

their help on this!

So... I have my issues with Yoda, but I still love him as a character. I mean, he' the epitome of 'old man stuck in his ways'... even if those ways are warrior monks, but hey. In Clone Wars, he was one of the first ones to try and change. Admittedly, it was too little too late, but I kind of feel like people don't like to give Yoda as much nuance as he could have, so here's my take on it. Dunno if I succeeded.

Also, as for those numbers, I looked up the amount of Clones they were estimated to have by the time the Clone Wars came about... and it was like more than 1.6 BILLION... which is a staggering number that I don't think we as people can truly comprehend. Now, admittedly, they still had children that Boba could infiltrate at the age of 11, so they were still growing said clones well into the war. (I don't remember many people in the show addressing that those clones would take a minimum of 8 years to grow to an age they could fight - and man, growing pains must SUCK for accelerated growth cycles... yeesh - but yeah, did they expect the war to last 10 years? Did they accelerate the growth more? How terrifying...)

In any case, thank you for reading. Chapter might be late next month again (sorry it was a couple of days late this month) as I'm having some major changes in my life: getting a new roommate, dealing with anxiety and other health problems - yes, I'm looking for a therapist. I'm sure you're shocked. LOL But yeah. Just a warning and a head's up.

Also, I'm working on my original book cover and am hoping to get it up by the end of the month. First 10 chapters should be free on Kindle Vella if I'm reading everything correctly... yeah. Will let you all know.

In any case, luv and hugz and thank you again!

Bookmark 2

Last bookmark I have planned. No, really, this should be the last one.

The next chapter of 'Trials of the Nearsighted' is up, though. It is a therapy chapter. FYI.

Next chapters will FINALLY cash in on that promise I made at the beginning with Obi-wan and Anakin bonding. Yes, I have had this planned FROM THE GET GO. Why did it take so long to get here?

In any case, next chapter technically up. I got some great feeback as to whether I should post those chapters here in this story or not, but... it was kind of divided. A lot of people thought a separate story was a good idea. A lot of people thought the chapters should go in here. Some people didn't care either way. And that's fine. I do appreciate that feedback and it will factor into my decision once the story is finished.

Meanwhile, next chapter should be up next month as it's currently in the beta reading stage.

Sorry for the note.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin ended up catching up with his friends for last meal and made plans to go and visit Obi-wan later tonight. Maybe he could sneak out and race some, even.

He'd gone to his mind-healing session and they'd spoken about grief and how to mourn and what to look for when one grieved. Also, what needed to be grieved. That had surprised him. He'd thought the loss of a friend or family member would be the only necessary application, but it apparently applied to so many other things too; everything from simple life-changes to serious losses of close relations.

It had been a little overwhelming.

But then, at the end of the session, Girth had dropped one last bombshell and asked Anakin to consider telling Obi-wan everything, stating that he would need to address whatever had happened between them before he could move on and heal from it – to begin the grieving process.

He'd have to mourn what he'd had… and apparently, speaking with this Obi-wan could potentially bring him some catharsis.

Anakin hadn't given him an answer, and Girth hadn't pushed, just asking him to think about it.

He hadn't known that Anakin had been planning on visiting Obi-wan… but somehow, it seemed like more than a coincidence.

Stupid Force nudges.

So now he stood outside of the healer's wing, staring up at it with trepidation.

Should he tell Obi-wan?

The old fear of how the man would react rose inside of him – of seeing all of that disappointment on his old mentor's face (even if it wasn't actually *his* mentor). It made him sick to think about…

But he'd been making a habit of being honest with himself lately. It had helped him immensely and this was no different.

He forced himself to see the harsh truths.

Firstly, those old feelings of having to hide things from Obi-wan to make sure the man stayed proud of him – stayed *with* him – had been a lot of what led him to Fall. If he'd been able to even talk about it with Obi-wan, maybe the man would have been upset and disappointed; maybe Anakin would have had to leave the Jedi Order to be with Padmé… but that would have been infinitely better than what had actually happened and would have spared so many people so much pain.

Including himself.

Secondly, the fact that he still felt that fear, even now, proved Girth right. He had to address it. He couldn't hide it… and that was what he had been doing; hiding it. Obi-wan's opinion (even this Obi-wan) mattered to him. A great deal.

It always had.

"*Only a master of evil,* Darth."

He wasn't sure what he'd expected from his old Master, but an even more formidable sabacc face than before wasn't it. Vader grit his teeth behind his mask. He wanted to see the man's horror and sorrow; his despair and hate.

He reached out through the Force…

All he got was pity… and maybe an old sorrow if anything.

And that wasn't what he wanted.

It just made him angrier. So he went to attack.

The fact that Obi-wan anticipated and attacked him first just fed his darkness.

Anakin closed his eyes and forced his thoughts away from that memory.

Perhaps he shouldn't share anything. It would likely just hurt Obi-wan…

But if he'd ever known anything about his old Master, he knew that

Obi-wan would want to know. Because Obi-wan wanted to help people – had only ever wanted to help Anakin, even if he hadn't really known *how* to.

But was it fair? This really wasn't his old Master. He was a different person now, and the two of them didn't have as deep of a relationship.

That didn't stop Anakin from wanting one. Maybe not the *same* one, but one that was stronger and healthier; one built on a better foundation.

A foundation of trust.

He took a deep breath and walked through the door.

(Plus, Girth suggested it.

And he found he trusted the mind-healer.

He'd been incredibly lucky to find such good mind-healers for him…

Or maybe it had been the will of the Force?)

He let out a sound bordering between a scoff and a chuckle.

"Oh! Ana… I mean, Initiate Skywalker," Bant Eerin said as she saw him and changed the angle she'd been initially walking at to intercept him. "I take it you're here to see Obi-wan… again."

"It has been a while since he's been in here," Anakin pointed out. "The last time I was here was to see Siri."

"So it was," the Mon Calamari said with an amused smirk. "Well, he's the third door on the right just down this hall," she said, gesturing to one of the walkways branching off of the main entrance room.

"Thank you," he replied, shooting what he hoped came off as a warm smile in her direction.

"Any time," she responded.

He turned to go down the hall, but his name stopped him.

"Oh, Initiate Skywalker." He turned back to Bant. "Some of the last few times you've been here, I've forgotten myself and called you by your first name. I don't recall asking for permission, so I apologize." She bowed to him before straightening up. "I have no excuse."

If that was the only offensive thing she had to worry about when it came to her own actions, Anakin envied her.

"I don't mind," he said. "You can call me Anakin, Healer Bant."

She shot him an enormous, toothless grin so reminiscent of her species. "Thank you, Anakin."

He nodded to her in acknowledgment and they mutually turned away from each other for their respective destinations.

Anakin wasn't sure what to think when he saw that Obi-wan remained in his healing trance. As far as he knew, no one seemed to know when the knight would wake up.

He still entered the room, a little hesitantly as he was still sorting through his feelings regarding this development (or lack thereof). Eventually, he decided on relieved but disappointed. He'd wanted to tell Obi-wan, no matter how much he dreaded it. He wanted to give this Obi-wan the chance that he'd never given his old Master.

Feeling more than a little silly, he still decided to reach out and put his hands on the much larger one laying limp next to the Jedi's prone body. He'd often spoken to Obi-wan when he'd been hurt and in the healer's wing after missions or during the war. Seeing him lying there felt so heartrendingly nostalgic that when his mouth opened (seemingly of its own accord), he didn't stop it.

"I sent Siri after Ferus," he said quietly, feeling he needed to start with reassurance. "I sent her with Jango Fett, of all people. I have no doubt they'll find him… although I don't know how much wreckage they will leave in their path. There will likely be explosions… and maybe I should have thought that through a little more."

He didn't really feel sheepish, but he tried to make himself sound that way, imagining the look of utter horror on Obi-wan's face at hearing Anakin's words.

"Oh, don't worry, Master," he said with a sad grin. "It'll be fine, I'm sure. Better than sending Ahsoka off with Ventress."

"*At least there weren't explosions from that unholy alliance,*" he imagined Obi-wan saying.

Anakin snorted. "Are you and I remembering the same instance?"

And then he blinked, realizing when and where he was. Not that he'd ever lost that knowledge, but… he hadn't ever allowed himself to really reminisce. It… hurt. A lot. He really did miss Obi-wan, so much.

"I… I have something to tell you," he finally choked out. "A lot of things, actually. And… and it'll likely make you hate me… so much. But you deserve to know. I'm not going to take up your offer of Padawanship, because even though it meant the universe to me, and helped me in ways you can't begin to understand, it's wrong. I've known it for a while – since I came back in time, actually, even if I didn't want to admit it."

He snorted. "Yes, I came back in time. That is my big secret. Well… one of them. And I plan on telling you all of them because, as I said, you deserve to know. Me keeping it from you would be selfish… and I am finished being selfish like that.

"But I am unsure if I can iterate it twice, so… wake up soon, please, and I will tell you everything. I am going to do what I should have done before you left to go to Utapau. Before that, even… before the Clone Wars and after my mother…

"Hmm. Perhaps I should stop there. Just… know you are not alone. Not this time. You have people waiting back here for you."

No answer. He sighed softly and closed his eyes, reaching out with the Force. Remembering his admiration for this man and focusing on that, he entered a light trance quickly, hoping that maybe he could get the sentiment through to the knight.

Wait… something was reaching back. He practically scrambled for the presence. Had Obi-wan been coming out of the trance after all?

He heard a voice croak, "Anakin?"

And then the world completely fell away.

Wait… what?

It took him several seconds to realize he was now in a vision…

Oh.

The world that suddenly surrounded him looked battle damaged. The fields around him had been burnt and lay dead as the blackened remnants shivered in mild breeze. The sky overhead hung heavy with

gray clouds and smoke, completing the gloomy picture. In the distance, he could see a smoking city.

He frowned. He'd never been to this world before.

"Who are you?" a familiar voice had him turning around to see Obi-wan standing there. He looked younger than Anakin had ever seen him. When Anakin looked down at himself, he saw he was in his older body.

That was… unusual. And disconcerting. He was not used to being the older of the two of them.

"It's… me," he said, then realized how ridiculous that sounded. But before he could correct himself, recognition lit up the boy's features.

"Anakin?"

"Yes," he responded, relieved. Then Obi-wan looked him up and down.

"Why are you so old?"

"Why are you so young?" he returned, not really wanting to answer that question just yet.

Fortunately, Obi-wan just chuckled. "Touché. Well, this is… something rather significant happened here in my past, I suppose."

"Oh?" Anakin asked, surprised and intrigued… and perhaps a little worried.

"Yes," the boy replied sadly. "I… left the Jedi Order for some people I met on this world."

Anakin just stared at him. He'd heard about that but… it hadn't seemed real. He'd thought it an exaggeration or a misunderstanding… but apparently not.

"I went back to the Order, of course," the boy went on, stepping past Anakin, eyes fixed on the distant city. "But this is a war-torn world. The people here… they refuse to try and see the other side and we couldn't do anything. There was a group of youth, who called themselves the Youth or the Young, coincidentally, who wanted peace and who fought both sides of the war." He shook his head. "I was so naive. I thought my presence could help them… but in the end, they died. Well, not all of them, I suppose." He smiled, trying to bring some

levity to the conversation, but it was a paltry attempt at best and soon the fake expression fell away.

He shook his head. "Honestly, this is a bit of a relief for me. I've been going over everything that happened with Ferus in my mind, just as I did here so many times and… Well, in any case, I have explained the setting. Will you explain your appearance now?"

Anakin felt himself deflate a little, but he also nodded.

"I suppose now is as good of a time to tell you as any. Better, even, as no one can overhear us here.

"I wanted to tell you everything."

Obi-wan raised his eyebrow, and suddenly he was a knight again, not the padawan from before.

"And what, pray tell, do you mean by 'everything'?"

Before Anakin could say anything, the world around them reformed, changing from dull grays, blacks and browns to warm tans, vibrant greens, blues and reds. Anakin immediately realized where they were: Naboo. They stood on the steps of the palace as Boss Nass held up the orb of peace. Padmé and Palpatine stood there as well and off to the side stood another Obi-wan and a young Anakin.

Oh.

Oh… kriff. He hadn't expected that… Would… would this happen every time he said something? Should he wait to explain? *Could* he wait?

The idea of showing Obi-wan everything… his chest felt tight. And yet, he wouldn't have to *tell* it either… maybe explain a bit here and there, but just showing the knight and letting him come to his own conclusions with as little input from Anakin as possible definitely had its appeal.

Was this really okay?

"I know this place… but this… this isn't what happened," the older Obi-wan said slowly as he approached the top of the steps. "What about Jedi Traavis? And why do you have a padawan haircut?"

It was Anakin's turn to smile sadly (and maybe self deprecatingly).

"Because this is what I remember from my first time."

Obi-wan turned to him, puzzled. "First time?"

Anakin nodded. "Obi-wan, this is the second time I've lived this life. I'm from the future."

xXx

Obi-wan stared at the man before him. Tall with dark blond hair, a scar over one of his eyes and while he looked to be in his early twenties, he gave off an air that made him seem as old as Yoda. Older, more tired, more resigned even.

"I beg your pardon?"

The man just shook his head and let out a half-chuckle, half sigh. "You heard correctly. I am from the future."

Which… actually made *so* much sense, but… also didn't because… *what*?!

"How?" he finally asked.

Anakin looked down for a moment and then up again. "You, actually."

Obi-wan didn't bother keeping the incredulous, skeptical bafflement off of his face and Anakin acknowledged that with a nod.

"Initially, I didn't have any training when Qui-gon found me. He still thought I was the 'Chosen One' and he was determined to take me back."

"That… sounds like him," Obi-wan muttered, amused and wistful. "If there was any life form within any distance that needed saving, he'd manage to find them and bring them with us. I became rather good at learning to re-home pets and plants during my padawan years."

He smiled, but then something occurred to him. Pieces fell together and he looked up at Anakin in realization.

"That's how you knew he would die… you'd lived it already."

A pained expression flickered across the face of the man Anakin would one day become before he nodded.

"I wanted to save him, even as conflicted as I was then."

Obi-wan managed a smile, even through the pang of pain that stabbed through him at the memory of his old Master.

"I still thank you for that."

Anakin snorted that time, as if he appreciated the thought but couldn't believe it. "Wait until the end… and then we'll see how grateful you are."

Well… that was ominous.

"In any case, in my first life, I had no dark training, so the temple didn't see the need to keep me around to keep an eye on me." He said that in an ironic, if slightly bitter, tone as he folded his arms and was suddenly beside Obi-wan, looking down at his younger self with an expression the knight couldn't read. "Qui-gon asked you to make sure I trained as a Jedi, so you took me on immediately."

The knight couldn't help but look in horror over at the older Anakin. That would have been a monumentally bad idea… but he'd considered it in this life too, and if he felt that was the only way…

"Oh, Force," he muttered, putting a hand to his forehead.

Anakin snorted. "You have no idea."

And Obi-wan believed him.

"This isn't going to be pretty, is it," he said softly. It wasn't a question.

For several seconds, Anakin didn't answer. When he finally did, he shook his head. "Yes and no." Then he looked over at Obi-wan, eyes pleading. "But I think you have to know. While we have already avoided many of the mistakes you will see, I think you need to know about them anyway. So you understand…"

"Understand what?"

The young man just shook his head. "You will see."

The world around them changed to the muted, calm colors of the Jedi Temple. For the next long while, Obi-wan watched as young Anakin began his life at the Jedi Temple, apprenticed to the 'Sith Killer', older than usually brought in and supposedly special and strong…

He watched as the boy was both revered and ostracized… much like how Ferus had told Obi-wan he felt; how he didn't really have any

friends from his crèche. At least, not close ones, and so Ferus had studied and put everything into being the best he could be, which had only ostracized him more.

It seemed Anakin had had a similar problem.

And then Anakin began to go over to the Senate building where he would meet with the Chancellor, at first with Obi-wan as the politician insisted on thanking them, but then with only Anakin. He frowned. That didn't seem right… but then Anakin came back so thrilled and upbeat after he'd been so lonely and melancholy before, so neither Obi-wan said anything.

Then Anakin made friends with Tru Veld and began going on missions. He caught up to his peers and then surpassed them with a determination Obi-wan could definitely relate to. Unfortunately, when they went on assignment, it looked as if their missions tended to go south just about as often as Obi-wan's and Qui-gon's had.

For the first time since he'd begun to view Anakin's other past, he spoke up. "I thought I would be through with missions gone entirely wrong once I became a knight."

Anakin glanced over at him, eyebrow raised in a gesture he could have only learned from Obi-wan (and for some reason, that sent a pang of longing and pain through his heart that he didn't understand).

"Naive of you."

It was Obi-wan's turn to snort. "You're not wrong…"

They continued to watch as Anakin grew, but Obi-wan had to comment.

"I wasn't ready to take on a padawan." It was obvious to him now, and he was pretty sure it would have been obvious to everyone then. He'd been openly grieving just as hard for Qui-gon as Obi-wan remembered from this life, and he couldn't imagine having someone to take care of on top of that.

"No," Anakin agreed. "You weren't. But the Council gave you no other choice except to send me away. I don't think taking me on was a good choice, but I am grateful to you… to the other you. More than I realized, now that I look back on this."

The scenes stopped coming in order and seemed to be geared more

towards emotions. They would get several happy or funny or carefree ones in a row ("Did you really reprogram that robot to say those things to the *Council Members*?" "What? It was funny!"), but one would either come from something sad or lead to something painful and then they would get a series of memories along those lines.

Eventually came the training trip to a planet Obi-wan recognized. His breath drew in as he watched events unfold so similarly to his most recent trip with Ferus.

"It was a targeted attack," he breathed, coming to realizations. "They were targeting me."

Anakin shot him an apologetic expression. "Yes. That," he pointed to the man they met towards the end of that rather nasty training trip that had turned into a life-or-death situation, "is Granta Omega, a Force Null with *connections,* who also happens to be the son of Xanatos Du Crion."

Obi-wan felt his mouth drop open as he stared at Anakin, hoping his accusation was nothing more than a cruel joke. His hopes shattered with Anakin's next words.

"He blames you for his father's death. Or, well, he blames Qui-gon, but as Qui-gon isn't here, he decided to target you… at least that was what I understood. I could be wrong. It wouldn't be the first time I've misread the subtext."

"He has Ferus…" Obi-wan whispered, the most horrible thoughts going through his mind of what his padawan could be going through. "Oh, Force…"

A hand on his shoulder had him looking over at Anakin's blue eyes. The boy he'd offered padawanship to… the boy who *had* been his padawan in another life.

"Siri has gone after him."

Obi-wan blinked. "Siri? But… why?"

Anakin sighed, although it seemed more amused than anything. "Because she came back with me. She has memories from the future too."

That… had not been something he'd expected… at all. Actually, none of this was, to be fair.

"She… came back?"

Anakin nodded. "She and her younger self merged, but it wasn't as easy or clean as my own experience was."

"That was why she was in the healer's wing…"

Anakin nodded again. "Yes. It took a while to fully integrate her future and past memories. I believe, she still has some disconnections, actually."

That… made so much sense with everything she'd spouted off at times and her inability to know when she was, or her age and rank…

But if that were true…

The horror from before came back and his stomach sank several inches. "I… was there when she… had some episodes."

Anakin winced and withdrew his arm.

"Yeah. I'll… get to that. Just know that Siri will bring him back. She still thinks of Ferus as her padawan at times and she's stubborn enough to not give up until she's found him."

Despite himself, Obi-wan relaxed at that, because if anyone knew that fact, he did. Siri didn't give up. He wasn't sure those words were in her vocabulary. The relief hit him and he smiled… but then it quickly changed to guilt because he should have been able to do something to prevent this. He was a Jedi Knight, for kriff's sake.

"One thing you should take from this," Anakin gestured to the verdant world around them while his other slef and young Anakin boarded their ship, "is that it is *not* your fault. Omega was after you and you couldn't have known."

"But, I should have—"

"Nope," Anakin said, holding up a hand and closing his eyes in either frustration or exasperation (or both?). "I know you know you have a guilt complex – that you take everything on yourself." He snorted. "So do I, actually. And we both have our reasons. But you have to realize that Ferus' kidnapping is *not* your fault. No more than it was mine. Or should I blame myself for coming back in time and changing things? I mean, Ferus wouldn't have gotten kidnapped had I not come back…"

He had a point, but that didn't stop Obi-wan from feeling guilty.

"Talk to Master Xio about this," Anakin suggested, having guessed or sensed his continuing mood. Then he looked up at the ship disappearing into the atmosphere of the planet. He seemed to find something grimly amusing. "It helps."

The idea of sharing anything like this made Obi-wan cringe, but… he had been doing better and feeling better since he'd begun to voluntarily attend mind-healing sessions…

"I… will think about it."

Anakin shot him a knowing look. "Please do more than that. If you don't discuss it, it becomes infinitely harder to overcome." He snorted. "Padmé used to tell me to talk to her, and I just thought it was a girl thing. Yet another example of naivety despite my past."

Obi-wan raised an eyebrow, curious.

The other young man waved his hand dismissively. "You'll understand later. In any case… moving on."

The two of them watched their other selves go on several more missions, all of them seemingly worse than the last.

One of them in particular had Obi-wan blurting out, "Is that an entire gundark nest?!"

"Yes," Anakin replied, smiling smugly.

Obi-wan's incredulity skyrocketed. "Not just *one*, a *whole nest*?!"

The other man just nodded, that smile never dimming.

"You seem to find my suffering enjoyable! How did I even survive that?!"

Anakin just laughed. He *laughed*, the brat! "Watch."

Fortunately, with young Anakin's help, he'd been able to get out of that mess… and that seemed to be a running theme.

"Is it just me, or did we have to rescue each other too often?"

"We had a running tally. Which I won, by the way."

Obi-wan couldn't help but find that somewhat offensive… well, maybe more mockingly offensive than anything, but still.

"I'm sure I did my part!"

Again, Anakin laughed, and Obi-wan realized that he'd never seen Anakin laugh unrestrained like that. It was a nice sound, relaxing and contagious and he found himself smiling warmly at the man. It seemed he'd been right in thinking that Anakin and he would make a good team once he was more ready to take on a padawan.

But then he realized that his knowledge of the Anakin he knew and the hints the man had dropped earlier didn't match up.

Something similar must have occurred to the other man because he'd stopped laughing and a dark expression covered his face. Dread and resignation and pain among other things.

Obi-wan stepped forward and put a hand on the taller man's shoulder. "Anakin… what happened?"

The pain in his expression increased and he looked up. His face spoke of fear and resentment and self-hatred and regret.

Then he said something that made Obi-wan almost sick.

"I made a series of *monumentally* stupid decisions and mistakes."

It didn't take long for the older knight to put it all together. "You Fell."

Anakin closed his eyes for several seconds as he seemed to gather himself. Then he looked up at Obi-wan and nodded.

"Yes. I did."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Ha! I told you I'd still have Anakin and Obi-wan bonding in here~! :D (Just wait until the next chapter... It'll be a great Christmas gift for some of you, lol.)

Thank you to Quathis, Hidden50 and Khalthar for their help on this! Luv you! Thankful for you!

Discord: https://discord.gg/TQxEBuhVjK

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn't take long for the older knight to put it all together. "You Fell."

Anakin closed his eyes for several seconds as he seemed to gather himself. Then he looked up at Obi-wan and nodded.

"*Yes. I did."*

Obi-wan didn't know what to say to Anakin's confession. He looked over at their other two selves, Master and Padawan, taking on the problems presented to them like a well-oiled machine. Not perfect – not by any stretch of the imagination – but competent and caring… and he just couldn't see it.

"How?" was all he could seem to voice.

Anakin looked down again, back to resigned. He nodded his head and then gestured to their surroundings again. The planet they found themselves on was barren and red. The dirt, the sky, the light; everything. It was… more than a little disconcerting.

"Where is this?"

"Korriban," Anakin answered tiredly. "You may know it as Moraband."

Obi-wan stepped away, the incredulous horror snapping back to him. "What?" he asked. Then he looked at the four pairs of Jedi interacting on the planet's surface. "But… you're all Padawans! Why would we take Padawans to an ancient Sith planet?"

Anakin snorted. "I have my suspicions… although Omega was there, too. The whole situation was… just one giant set up, I think. I couldn't tell you who all orchestrated it, not definitively. I only have conjecture."

But it was obvious he had his suspicions… Ones he didn't share.

Obi-wan decided not to push instead turning his attention back to the memory. He watched as the Masters and Apprentices split up, each heading for their own mission. He watched as the Apprentices came

together while the knights and Masters went to confront what they deemed the more dangerous. How a scientist neither he nor Anakin seemed to care for – Jenna Zan Arbor – came into the picture and the kind of dangerous information she and Omega were after. He watched the Padawans have problems among themselves and then how, at the end and during a showdown, Anakin's now grown-up friend, Darra, died. Anakin's other friend, Tru, blamed him, and to a point rightfully so, but only to a point. He was still a Padawan, and putting a death like that on the shoulders of even a senior apprentice… That was not entirely fair.

He watched as Ferrus *left* the order…

He saw how heartbroken Siri was about it.

It struck him, then, how much Siri cared for Ferrus. Not that he hadn't believed Anakin before, but seeing it drove it home.

"Everything was so different after that," Anakin muttered.

Obi-wan blinked over at him both in worry and confusion.

He must have sensed it somehow because he glanced over. "Just little things… but it made all the difference. I was an outcast again with few or no friends, you… just never knew how to help me when it came to things like that, I think. Siri… didn't handle it well and went on several solo missions after that, throwing herself into work. Sound familiar? Little things… but they added up to something enormous once you consider their impact."

He didn't seem to really be consciously aware of what he'd said, but Obi-wan didn't want to interrupt him.

And then the scene changed again and they were watching Anakin sit in front of the Chancellor. Obi-wan frowned, because shouldn't he be out of office at this point? Anakin had to be eighteen… maybe even nineteen. Even if he got reelected… well, he supposed it *could* be at the end of Palpatine's term… but there was still something off about the situation and he couldn't put his finger on it.

It took him several moments to realize that Anakin left the meeting with a smile, but it faded to a troubled frown once the boy got into the halls of the Senate building.

Finally, he decided to speak up and swallowed, despite knowing he didn't have a body that necessitated that action.

"Did you… often leave his office troubled?"

Anakin snorted. "In the later years, yes."

The scene switched to another view of him and Anakin riding in an elevator, bantering back and forth half-seriously. At the top, they met Padmé, dressed in finery but without any of her royal makeup. Obi-wan hadn't been expecting that.

The knight learned she had an assassin after her and the Chancellor wanted her protected. She hated that, but eventually capitulated on the condition that they assigned her guards she already knew and so Obi-wan and Anakin ended up chasing a plot all over the universe. Eventually, they split up so the older Jedi could track the assassin down and the younger could protect Padmé (Naboo's newest senator, apparently). Obi-wan didn't know what happened on his side, but… he did see what happened with two young adults who were both very good at their chosen field as they tried to awkwardly get to know each other again.

It was honestly almost painful to watch the not-courtship as it… progressed? Even the Anakin standing next to Obi-wan groaned and hid his face more than once.

The other Anakin and Padmé ended up on Naboo, which seemed like a poor choice of hideout to Obi-wan, but then left for Tatooine because of dreams?

A twinge of something dark had Obi-wan turning to his companion, puzzled. He opened his mouth to ask if the other man was alright, but was met with a raised hand and a single pointer finger. Anakin didn't even look at him – couldn't, from what the knight could sense. Not without yelling or screaming… or worse.

Swallowing, Obi-wan turned back and watched as the Padawan Anakin had tracked down his mother, unwisely leaving Padmé with the step-father he'd never met before while he went out after his kidnapped family member.

He found her.

She died. In his arms. From torture.

Unsurprisingly, the young Jedi didn't take that well.

The older Anakin by Obi-wan's side, looked away. The red-head found

he couldn't.

Padawan Anakin slaughtered the entire camp, leaving none alive, before picking up his mother's body, wrapping it carefully and then taking off back to the Lars' homestead.

"I never noticed it before," older Anakin whispered, mostly to himself from his tone. "How could I not notice that he was there? Qui-gon was trying to get me to stop."

Obi-wan, still reeling from what he'd just seen, blinked and stepped back as if to take the whole of Anakin in.

"Didn't you hear him?" the taller man asked, eyes tired. Then he sighed. "He must not be able to enter this… whatever it is. Vision? Private conversation, I suppose."

A jolt of pain shot through Obi-wan at the idea that his Mentor could be here now, but wasn't. Then he reminded himself that Qui-gon couldn't be here… because he was dead. He didn't know whether his companion could sense the depth of his emotions, read his mind or could just see the anguish on Obi-wan's face, but his voice quieted considerably when he spoke next, although he remained just as firm as ever.

"He is one with the Force. That does not mean he is gone or lost to you," Anakin said tersely, but his fatigue seemed to have taken any edge off of his tone.

Obi-wan… didn't know what to say to that. Because Anakin believed it. He could tell, but he wasn't sure if he could bring himself to believe that right now. It still hurt too much.

He looked back at the scene playing out to see Padawan Anakin confessing his crime to Padmé. She just comforted him…

The red-head wasn't sure if that was the right answer in that situation or not (his first instinct would have been to correct bad action), but realized he also probably had no room to judge.

"My mother died because you wouldn't let me go and check on her," Anakin said, the anger beginning to override his slump.

Oh.

Oh.

That… that explained quite a bit, actually. Young Anakin's anger towards him (if he had these memories all along), his mixed signals of friendship and animosity, his strange knowledge and maturity. Although… Obi-wan *hadn't* brushed Anakin's worries off. The Obi-wan that had had taken *Anakin* as a student, not Ferus Olin.

And yet…

"You don't want an apology," he observed. In front of him, the Lars family, Anakin and Padmé held a funeral for Shmi Lars.

And that quickly, all the anger that had been building in the other man vanished, leaving him looking even more exhausted than before.

"No, I suppose I don't."

Neither of them spoke for several seconds. Then Obi-wan dared to venture quietly…

"What… do you want?"

The older man (who should be younger) snorted wryly. Despite that, there was no amusement in his expression or the emotions that Obi-wan could sense. Then he shook his head.

"I don't really know. Acknowledgment, perhaps? A way to handle the pain and guilt of losing her and not being there and then my… reaction." He let out a low breath. "I suppose it doesn't matter. I don't want it from you… I wanted it from him," he said as he gestured to the small holoprojection of the older Obi-wan Kenobi that Anakin and Padmé were watching as they rerouted the message to the Council on Coruscant.

"But I could never get it from him because I refused to tell him." Anakin scoffed and shook his head again. "No wonder I was always just as angry at myself as I was at him…"

He faded off, but Obi-wan couldn't leave it like that. Every fiber in his being screamed for him to do *something*. So he opened his mouth. "I… will listen to my Padawans," he said. "I won't brush them off. I will do my best to do right by them, I promise."

For several seconds, Obi-wan wasn't even sure the older man had heard him, but then he gave the red-head a bittersweet smile. "Thank you."

But the knight could sense the other's dejection.

"It's not enough," he pointed out, at a complete loss of what to do.

That made the other man's smile brighten just a bit. "No, but it is something, and I, of all people, can appreciate that – and hopefully, work with it. So thank you nonetheless."

Obi-wan was about to say something, but the memory kept playing and he saw Anakin and Padmé leaving Tatooine to rescue the other him, mainly on Padmé's insistence.

"This… won't go well, will it," he heard himself say and decided to run with the change of topic.

Anakin snorted. "No."

Obi-wan watched as they landed on *another* desert planet, then sneaked into the facilities they found there. Anakin lost his lightsaber (*again* – even Obi-wan hadn't been that bad with his lightsabers as a Padawan) and Padmé almost got killed via molten metal. Fortunately, they were both rescued and then subsequently caught by the population of insect-like sapients running the droid factories. Unfortunately, that turned out to not be much better as they were reunited with Obi-wan in an arena where they would be executed.

(Not before they pronounced their love for each other, just as awkwardly as ever… and honestly, Obi-wan couldn't really blame them this time as they were about to potentially be killed, but still…)

That was when he learned that Count Dooku, of all people, was involved. Count Dooku. As in his Master's Master… Just what had happened in those ten years?! Well… to people besides himself and Anakin.

The next several minutes consisted of the three of them – Anakin, Padmé and Obi-wan – doing everything they could to stay alive.

Then, for some reason Obi-wan couldn't fathom, *dozens* of Jedi entered the arena to stop the execution. Why would so many come to help them? There had to be something he was missing…

"I… don't understand. Why did so many Jedi come to rescue us?"

"You… the other you, I suppose," Anakin said thoughtfully, "found a planet with a population of cloners creating a clone army ordered for

the Jedi by one Syfo-Dias, who had died several years earlier. You held a good deal of information and had personally seen proof of a coalition of planets joining together to break off from the Republic. This was… more than disturbing enough for the Council to come to get us. It also offered the chance to confront Dooku, which the Council wanted to do.

"In the end, though…"

Obi-wan watched in horror as many, *many* Jedi died in the subsequent shoot-out as battle droids of all kinds surrounded them. Dooku even stopped the fight and offered them a deal (that Mace Windu didn't take, because of course he didn't) when Master Yoda showed up with… well, an army.

The result was chaos, but at least the rest of the Jedi (and *Padmé*, somehow) survived.

Obi-wan, Padmé and Anakin chased Dooku, but Padmé got knocked out of their air car. Anakin didn't like that and it took the older Obi-wan quite a bit of desperate persuasion to get Anakin to help him take on Dooku instead of going back for her.

Unfortunately, Anakin rushed into the fight too quickly and was thrown out of the battle with *force lightning.* Obi-wan had heard of force lightning, but while it could be used by light-wielders, it… was difficult to do at best, and somehow he was pretty sure that hadn't been a light technique.

He had a very bad feeling about this.

He was proven right when he watched himself get soundly defeated with a wince. Anakin tried to save him, but he lost an arm for his trouble.

Fortunately, the day seemed to be one continuous last-minute save after another as Master Yoda showed up, yet again, and fought his former Padawan to a draw in a display that Obi-wan had never seen from the Grandmaster, even during his rare public duels. It was… awe inspiring.

Unfortunately, Dooku managed to distract him by using the Force to pull stone pillars down on top of an injured Obi-wan (obviously trying not to move and either draw attention or make his wounds worse) and a very much in shock Anakin. Yoda turned his attention to saving them and the former Jedi escaped.

And that started an entire galactic war. Planets would choose to stay with the corrupted Republic or they would choose to go with the Confederacy of Independent Systems, aka Seperatists.

Obi-wan frowned. "I don't understand. If they wanted to leave the Republic, why not simply let them?"

"The Senate was too afraid they would become a military power and turn on The Republic. The following war did little to disabuse them of the notion."

And Obi-wan could see that. He didn't necessarily *agree* with it, but…

He didn't know how long he watched battle after battle after battle fought between these 'clones' and the droids, but somehow it seemed as if the fighting would never end. Was this why Anakin Fell? He didn't think so… especially not after getting knighted at such a young age and then gaining a Padawan of his own.

This was, of course, after he'd married Padmé in secret.

Oh, Force.

He watched as the Jedi became closer to their commanders – how Rex and Cody (as they called themselves) became valuable members of Obi-wan and Anakin's circle of friends. He watched as Siri died in his arms and Satine Kryze, of all people, showed back up in his life. He watched as Jedi broke and Fell all around them – people Obi-wan had thought would always be rooted in the light, like Depa Balliba and Pong Krell. And still the fighting didn't stop.

Then the Council allowed Anakin's Padawan to be *tried* by the *Senate*. For a crime *against the Jedi Temple* specifically with circumstantial evidence at best.

What?!

Anakin had to go behind the Council's back to find the evidence that cleared the young Togruta's name. He succeeded, thankfully, but Obi-wan was unsurprised when she still left the Order.

And then it got *worse*.

Maul (*how was he even alive?!*) and his *brother* (what the actual…) killed Satine in front of Obi-wan and… even after all of that, he had to continue to fight. More battles, more deaths, little sleep and food…

and why was this even all happening? Why were they fighting with an army they clearly did not make? That was made *for* them! This… this made so little sense.

Somehow, it all accumulated at once. Even though she'd left the order, Ahsoka ended up fighting Maul on Mandalore in a terrifying battle. Meanwhile, Anakin and Obi-wan were recalled to Coruscant to save the Chancellor who had been kidnapped, but Obi-wan was knocked out and Palpatine told Anakin to kill Dooku after they'd defeated him and cut off his hands (*No! He's defenseless!)* and then they'd crashed the ship onto Coruscant (how many people had that killed?!)…

And Padmé was pregnant.

Anakin kept having terrible dreams.

And Obi-wan knew where this was going.

It just kept building and the red-head could only watch as Anakin *broke* under so much pressure; from the Chancellor to the Council to his *wife* who was fighting battles of her own in the Senate because Palpatine had taken far too much power due to the war and…

Wait…

A horrible thought occurred to Obi-wan.

But… it couldn't be…

Could it?

"You've figured it out, I see," Anakin's deep voice asked as the older man stared at Obi-wan, face unreadable.

"But… that can't be…" Obi-wan said.

"Hmm," was all the Older Anakin replied with before turning to look at his younger self… no, he looked about the same age now. Regardless, the Anakin from the memories spoke with Palpatine as they watched the Mon Calamari Ballet…

The Chancellor spoke of 'Darth Plageus the Wise' and…

Oh, *Force*…

The other Obi-wan had already been sent off planet and Anakin went with this information to the Council, but requested that Palpatine be

merely arrested because he *needed* the man's knowledge to keep someone (Padmé) alive. Anakin disobeyed direct orders, followed the Council members and walked into the Chancellor's office to see three of the four Jedi Masters dead while Mace Windu cornered Palpatine in front of the large window in the room. He had his lightsaber raised, ready to strike the Chancellor down and Obi-wan closed his eyes as Anakin acted. He opened them again just in time to see Mace Windu's handless body disappear into the Coruscant traffic.

Memory Anakin seemed to realize what he'd just done and didn't seem to know how to process it, so when Palpatine offered him the knowledge he so desperately desired if Anakin served him…

Obi-wan was sick.

"I've never actually spoken of what happened that day… to anyone."

The Jedi Knight turned to see that the older Anakin had gone very, very pale. If Obi-wan looked closely, he could see the man shaking.

"Oh… Anakin…" Obi-wan whispered and reached out to put a comforting arm on his shoulder, but the man's cold glare stopped him.

"Don't. I don't deserve it. Not with what came next." He nodded at the scene as the younger Anakin – newly named Vader – marched up the steps of the Jedi Temple, hundreds – if not thousands – of clones behind him.

Obi-wan actually threw up twice (it had to be psychosomatic – the vomit disappeared before it hit anything) during the following slaughter of the Jedi and the fall of the Temple – the execution of Order 66. Any sapient he came across up to and including the sick and their attendees (he couldn't watch as Anakin personally cut Bant down as she tried to protect her patients)… no one was safe from Anakin's – from *Vader's* blade.

The current Anakin spoke, voice barely audible. "While this was going on, the Clones (who all had chips implanted in their brains that, when activated, made them little more than robots with no autonomy of their own) all turned on their Jedi commanders – some while in the middle of battle – and destroyed them, one by one.

"Few survived. You," Anakin looked at Obi-wan, face still pale and gaunt, "were one of them."

"How?" Obi-wan croaked out, trying not to shake himself.

Anakin shook his head shortly. "I don't know, but I can't say I'm surprised. You… had a habit of surviving the unsurvivable."

His fondness almost chased the pain and disgust out of his voice. Almost.

Meanwhile, the younger Anakin – no Vader was sent to destroy the Separatist leaders because he and Obi-wan already killed Dooku and Grievous. But that brought up *another* question.

"How did Palpatine know where the Separatist Leaders were?" Obi-wan managed to force himself to ask.

"He orchestrated the entire thing," Anakin replied. He seemed to have retreated behind a stony mask of indifference, but Obi-wan could sense his raging emotions beneath the surface. He didn't know what to do about it or if he *could* do anything about it… or if he should even try…

"He ran both sides of the war from behind the scenes and played everyone for fools. And everyone else was just too blind to see it."

Obi-wan felt as if his head would burst. He rarely found it difficult to wrap his mind around complex ideas, but this… This was just too much. And the destruction of the Jedi? *By his own student*?!

He wasn't sure he could take much more of this.

He had no idea how Anakin had taken it as well as he had. Even with foreknowledge – especially with foreknowledge, this would have broken Obi-wan. He already felt as if he were barely holding the pieces of his heart together, and this was only after viewing it, not *living* it.

Vader traveled to a lava-planet called Mustafar and found the Separatist leaders there. He cut them down much like he'd cut down the Jedi and then waited. For what, Obi-wan didn't know, but apparently he had instructions from Palpatine – Sidious. He had instructions from *Sidious* to wait there.

A day later, a still very pregnant Padmé showed up with all-too-true accusations about him, telling him about the fall of the Republic and how it had been turned into an Empire. She begged her husband to not continue down the path he seemed to have chosen, but Vader would hear none of it.

And then Obi-wan saw himself standing on the ramp to Padmé's ship.

What? How…?

He supposed it didn't matter how he had known, though. He was there as much as he *knew* his other self did not want to be. Vader accused Padmé of turning against him and used the Force to *choke* her – *his pregnant wife* – causing her to collapse once he turned his attention to his former Master. Then the two of them fought. *Brutally*. The younger Obi-wan found that once again, he couldn't look away as tears streamed down his face.

The entire fight ended with Anakin claiming he could best Obi-wan who had taken the high ground. Why the younger Anakin didn't just go for his old Master's feet, he didn't know, but the goading seemed to have worked and the boy took the leap he shouldn't have.

He ended up short his other three limbs as he slowly sank down the bank of rock and soot towards the lava. Obi-wan, who had defeated his former Padawan, could only watch as Vader caught fire, spouting vitriol the entire time.

Worse… his older self just *left* Anakin there. *After* he was defeated and…

What had that war done to them?

"And that…" the Older Anakin's voice choked and Obi-wan could tell the man was fighting a complete breakdown of his own. "That is why I do not deserve your pity or consideration. Because that was only the beginning of a long list of atrocities I willingly committed in the name of the Emperor's false peace."

Well… he wasn't wrong… and yet…

"How…" Obi-wan started, but had to swallow past a lump in his throat. "How did you become so strong?"

Anakin's head turned to him so quickly, Obi-wan was sure he would have gotten an injury had they been in their physical bodies. He didn't seem to have any words to convey his utter confusion at Obi-wan's inquiry, so the knight clarified.

"You came back from *that!* Just… *how?!*"

For several seconds, Anakin just stared, wide-eyed, at Obi-wan. The

younger (older? So confusing) man didn't want to move as he waited for his answer.

And then Anakin laughed a sort of hysterical, disbelieving laugh.

"You really aren't him," he finally managed to say.

It was Obi-wan's turn to blink in confusion.

"You aren't my cynical, snarky, jaded, broken, old Master," Anakin continued, tears coming to the corner of his eyes, he was laughing so hard.

And then…

And then he was crying.

"So… why do I want you to be?"

Obi-wan sensed that he shouldn't open his mouth and thus kept it firmly closed as the other man went on.

"I was never good enough for him! But he would do everything in his power to help me. I did so many things that would have disappointed him, but he fought for me anyway. In the end, I didn't trust him.

"I should have. *I should have*."

Tears streamed down his cheeks now and Obi-wan could only watch in morbid fascination as this man broke.

Over him.

Or… well, over who he *could* be, he supposed.

And a situation that was much more complicated than he presented in those last sentences.

"I hate him so much! But I *still love him* too!

"*Why did he do this to me?!*" Anakin screamed. "And *why didn't he follow me himself*?! I can never see him again! I can never *tell him* how much I *miss* him! How much I would take that *all* back if I could! How… *how sorry I am*! *How much I still love him*."

And the man collapsed into a sobbing ball in the middle of what appeared to be emptiness. No more scenes played in the background.

Obi-wan vaguely realized that Anakin hadn't answered his question, but filed that away for later because his friend – his Padawan from another life – was in pain and he had to *do something*.

Hopefully something more helpful than before.

He was still reeling from revelations himself, but… Anakin needed him now.

He took a deep breath and steeled himself. Then he strode forward and crouched in front of the quivering form.

"You're right," he finally said softly, putting a hand on Anakin's shoulder. The other man flinched, but didn't pull away. Obi-wan took that as a win and continued. "I'm *not* him. Even if I could have been, I… don't think I ever will be now.

"Part of me… is very sorry for this because I see how much you wish to speak with him. I can tell how much he meant to you. I may share his face, but I cannot replace him."

Anakin just wept harder.

"If you want me to leave you alone so you can heal, then I will do it. If you want me to walk away and not look back, I will. But… I would much rather that we start over and build a new relationship – one that is free of the baggage from the past. If you're alright with that? I cannot be a father figure to you, but… maybe a friend? Or a brother?"

The other man's sobs died down and he looked up at Obi-wan incredulously.

"B-but why?"

Obi-wan blinked. "Why what?"

"I was a Sith. You saw me tear down the lives of everyone I'd ever come in contact with – slaughter children even. Why aren't you chasing me away?"

Well… fair question.

Obi-wan made sure to give it the thought it deserved.

After a couple of moments he smiled softly. "Because you are genuinely and truly sorry, striving to change everything you possibly can even to a point of your own detriment. You have proven time and

time again that you mean what you say. I cannot, in good conscience, let such efforts go to waste.

"Besides," he managed a real smile and hoped Anakin could feel that, "if he wouldn't at least try to get to a point where he could forgive you, than he may not be someone I want to grow into. Doing anything else feels wrong.

"My only caveat is to just… make sure you don't do it again, yes?"

The short, hysterical laugh was back as Anakin stared at him incredulously.

Then he did something completely unexpected, lunging forward and throwing his arms around Obi-wan.

"I swear to you, on anything I have ever held dear that I will not."

Obi-wan clung to the man, needing the comfort his presence gave him as much as Anakin seemed to need his.

"I believe you."

Another half sob/half laugh left Anakin.

An unknown amount of time later, Anakin sat back, not looking at Obi-wan out of embarrassment.

"You're… not going to accept the Padawanship, are you," the knight said, only half joking. It wasn't a question.

Anakin scoff-laughed. "No. At this point, it would only be inviting trouble."

Obi-wan nodded, feeling a little relieved himself, but also sad at the lost potential. "Well, then, let's start over again. Hello, Anakin Skywalker. My name is Obi-wan Kenobi, Jedi Knight. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

He held out his hand and smiled as brightly as he could.

Anakin's breathy laugh seemed more real than just about anything he'd seen from the man… boy… person. Then he took the offered appendage and shook it firmly.

"Hello, Obi-wan Kenobi. I am Anakin Skywalker, former slave, former Jedi, former Sith. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

They sat there for several seconds before Obi-wan broke down into a laugh of his own. "Even for a Force vision this is… surreal."

Anakin chuckled along with him, smile still bright on his face. It took years off of his projected age.

"I sense that now isn't the time, but… if you're alright with telling me, I'd still like to know how you came back from that." As the smile faded from the other's face, Obi-wan hurried to reassure him. "When you're ready, of course. If you're ready."

The older man looked down as if his gaze had become heavy. "Maybe someday. I would like to tell you. The short answer is… I found a reason that meant more to me than the power the darkness offered."

More silence as Obi-wan digested that.

"I… know I don't have any right to say this, but… I am so proud of you, Anakin. And if he is anything like me, then he would be too."

Anakin looked back up, tears in his eyes again.

"Thank you," he said. "I cannot express how much I appreciate that."

"Perhaps," Obi-wan finally said, "it is time for us to leave this… whatever it is. I think I can sense Healer Che panicking."

"Could be worse," Anakin said, sounding lighter than Obi-wan had ever heard him. "It could be Bant."

"You hold your tongue!" Obi-wan exclaimed in mock horror. "She'd never let me leave this place if she could!"

Anakin chuckled again, then took a breath.

"Thank you again, Obi-wan. I will see you there."

Obi-wan nodded and then watched as Anakin vanished. He could still sense the boy (man?) and just had to sit there for a minute and *process*.

He'd likely be 'processing' for a long while to come.

Realizing that the child he and his Master had found was actually living his second life – and what his first life had been like… it was mind-boggling.

He sat there for an unknown amount of time, just going through everything he'd seen and finally came to one conclusion. He could do nothing but move on and try to do right by the boy in this new life. For his other self's sake. For his own sake. For Anakin's sake…

Nodding, he decided to take a step back and come back to everything later. Right now, he needed to go and confront Healer Che.

Funny, he'd never thought he'd see such a confrontation as being an escape.

With that, he reached out and let himself return to consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

AN: There you go! An extra long chapter for Christmas (or whatever you celebrate)! Hope you enjoyed it! Please let me know!

I would like to thank Quathis, Khalthar and Hidden50 for their help on this! (No, seriously, thank you.)

Revamped Discord Server (well, we're trying): https://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin stood before the doorway to the Chancellor's office, making sure to center himself before he went in.

I am a former slave and still recovering from the effects that has had on me. I am afraid of old men and wary of people in general. I am a child with a very limited view on the universe, most of it cynical, but still hopeful and naive. I am still not fully able to trust the Jedi.

In all honesty, almost all of those points hit a little too close to the truth for him to be very comfortable with them, but they were what he had to work with.

It didn't help that he was still feeling open and raw from his confrontation with Obi-wan and the mutual vision. After much fuss from the healers, they'd finally been left alone for about an hour and neither one of them had been able to say much. It had been awkward and painful, but… also not as bad as Anakin had feared, so he'd take it but… that didn't mean it wasn't weighing on his mind. Once they'd been cleared, they had parted ways with a quiet understanding that they would continue to speak about it later, after they'd had time to digest what had happened and all the revelations therein. (Anakin couldn't help but be grateful for that as he most certainly felt far too raw to approach the subject again so soon.)

So he took a deep breath and let it out, trying to release all of his negativity to the Force so he could focus. Here and now. He'd speak with Obi-wan in the future and would think about it then.

Nodding to himself once more and shelving everything that distracted from his current situation, he hit the button that would open the door before he could back down.

Inside, he saw the familiar dichotomy of the dark red walls casting shadows and the bright daylight streaming through the enormous windows. In the center, of course, sat the Supreme Chancellor himself. He looked up at the sound of the door opening and sent Anakin a warm smile.

(That smile haunted his nightmares.)

"Anakin! It is good to see you. Please, come in."

"Chancellor," he said a little hurriedly, "I've finished all my work." He quickly put the data pad with the checked-off list on the desk and then stepped back, falling into his attention pose without really realizing it until Palpatine frowned at him – not the 'I'm disappointed' frown that would be followed by the sadistic grin he was so used to (and then pain), but the false, 'I'm worried for you,' frown.

(That also haunted his nightmares.)

"My boy, I told you, you don't have to act so formally with me." He paused, looking expectantly at the initiate, whose mouth had gone very dry. That tone never meant anything good…

"Right," Anakin forced himself to say softly. Then he consciously relaxed as much as he dared.

"Please, sit," Palpatine continued. "I'll go over your work. I'm sure it will be up to your usual standards."

Oh, he was so good. He said it so nicely.

For several seconds, silence fell over them as Palpatine checked over the list on the data pad. Then he set it down with a nod. "Exemplary work, as usual."

Anakin couldn't look up at him again at that moment. Not with that 'compliment' having just been said.

"Thank you, sir."

The man scooted the data pad to the side before he frowned again. "Anakin… I will admit, I am a bit… worried. I have been ever since you told me of your past. Thank *you* for trusting me with it."

Anakin had to fight not to wince because it still grated on him that he'd had to say as much as he had. He'd always known he would have to tell the man something, but even what Anakin had told him *still* felt like too much (and probably always would).

It was necessary, he told himself. *You know what to look for. Find those inconsistencies and cling to them.* Even as small as they were, they made all the difference.

He still wasn't entirely sure how to react to Palpatine's 'thank you'

though. Part of him wanted to grin smugly, as he'd seen past the manipulation, but that would give too much away, obviously. Part of him didn't want to respond at all, but that would also give too many hints as to his true nature and past, so instead, he just looked down, as if embarrassed and opened his mouth as if to say something before closing it again.

"I won't break that trust, I promise," the old man reassured. This time it took Anakin everything in his power to not outright laugh at that blatant lie. So he closed his eyes, counted to ten, and then forced himself to nod.

"Thank you, sir," he managed to say softly (and not through gritted teeth, he was doing very well today).

More silence… and Anakin realized that even this much was too much – too long without any words. Tensing, he glanced up and saw Palpatine studying him intently. His stomach fell to his knees.

"S-sir?" he asked quietly.

The man sat forward with a sigh. "I know you don't like me, Anakin," he said sadly (and even with everything Anakin knew, that still felt like a punch to the gut… kriff).

"That's not true," he blurted, but the man held up his hand. The time-traveler fell silent out of habit more than anything else, and hated himself for it.

"I know it has nothing to do with me, and that there are triggers and trauma in your past you are working through. I am terribly sad that a child such as yourself has had to go through them at all, but I also find the fact that you are addressing and working through them admirable. But, honestly, all I want is for you to trust me. I realize that may not be something that can happen right now, but if you're amenable, I'd like to work towards that."

He sent that soft, sad smile at Anakin again… and what could he say to that but: "Yes, sir. I… I'd like that."

No, he very much wouldn't. But needs must.

He felt like he was being corralled here and he hated that too.

The Chancellor smiled sadly. "I realize it must be so terrifying for you to be here, even now, and that you must feel overwhelmed and like

you'll never fit in. I'm sure you feel lost and alone – set adrift in a galaxy that has never treated you kindly."

It was scary how accurate that was… and yet, not completely so, and the initiate had to keep that in mind. Palpatine *didn't* know exactly what Anakin was thinking or feeling, no matter how much he 'guessed', or even how accurately he did so.

"Is there anyone you can turn to?" the Sith in disguise asked.

Anakin had reached into his pocket and was squeezing his stress ball. How should he answer that… if he said no, Palpatine would probably try and get Anakin to 'temporarily' trust him, and he wasn't entirely sure he could get out of that cleanly, so that was out… but who could he say? His initial instinct was to not name a Jedi because he didn't trust the Jedi… but just because he didn't trust the Jedi as a whole didn't mean he didn't trust *a* Jedi.

"Yes."

"Oh? May I ask whom? If you're willing to tell me of course."

Why did he have to use that tone? That tone that sounded so much like his therapists who really *did* care for him. Who really did want him to get better.

Anakin bit his lip, going through everyone in his mind.

Because he'd just thought of his mind-healers, he considered mentioning Girth. After all, the drall was not a Jedi but was currently in the Temple under their protection and thus out of Palpatine's reach. But that would also bring up questions about why Girth was there at the Temple. Why had the Jedi gone outside the Temple for a therapist at all? (*So* much ammunition there.) And Girth wasn't just any therapist, but one that was fairly well known in his field and who had no natural defenses against Sith mind techniques, only that which Anakin himself had put up. But that was a stop-gap measure at best. Girth was also easy to look up and his previous cases could potentially give a little too much insight into Anakin's case.

No, that was too risky.

Yoda came to mind, but while he could obviously hold his own against Palpatine, he was a Jedi *and* an old man, albeit another species, but it was close enough to make Anakin wary about naming the Grandmaster. He could see how Palpatine could use that for

leverage.

He moved on to other options.

Siri was an obvious answer, except for the fact that she was a newly minted knight with a history of mental instability and had left the Temple for an unknown period of time. Palpatine could definitely use that as leverage or as an argument to get Anakin to temporarily "trust" him and that was still not something he felt he was ready to reject in a way that wouldn't raise suspicions. Still the best option so far, but he wanted a better option, if at all possible.

Palpatine, thankfully, mistook Anakin's hesitance as him not wanting to say.

"I just want to know you have someone near you. Everyone needs something like that, Anakin."

Ugh, how could he take the truth and make it serve him so well?

The time-traveler played up his childishness by biting his lip as he went through more people, his mind working in overdrive to find someone.

Obi-wan might work, as someone else who could hold his own against Palpatine, at least better than a non-sensitive could, and while he was an *older* man, he wasn't an *old* man (yet). But there was really so much baggage there when it came to Anakin. Plus, he'd fallen for Palpatine's manipulations before and was likely not in a state to really make healthy, well-thought-out decisions at the moment with Anakin's recent revelations and Ferus still missing.

Anakin crossed his old master off of his mental checklist.

Both Mace Windu and Plo Koon came to mind, even if he was just mentioning someone strong who could stand up to the Chancellor, but… Anakin didn't want Palpatine to follow through, and Anakin had no doubt he would.

He most *certainly* couldn't name any of his physical peers. That was beyond selfish, reckless and stupid.

That really only left one person… and why hadn't he thought of her sooner?

"I… speak with Master Xio a lot," he said softly. It would make sense

that he was going through some sort of mind-healing or therapy, and Palpatine had suggested that he knew Anakin was doing so. The Sith in disguise didn't have to know how deeply their sessions went (too much again, but he'd work with it… he *had* to). "And some of the healers there, like Knight Eerin." Knight Eerin who rarely left the temple and was a skilled healer and Force user. She couldn't fight Palpatine physically, but could hold her own mentally.

Palpatine continued to study Anakin for a moment longer before he nodded and smiled. "Good. That gladdens my heart. And as I stated earlier, I hope that one day, I can be added to that list."

Anakin nodded again and forced a smile on his face.

The Chancellor didn't seem to buy it, though, which had Anakin backing down worriedly. Had he not been convincing enough? He tried not to panic, making sure to keep a tight reign on his emotions.

If he didn't, there would be pain… so much pain…

"I think you're more powerful than you realize, Anakin," Palpatine finally said, not helping Anakin's panicking at all. "From what I've heard from your past hosts for the Ambassador program you are a fast learner and intelligent. I… don't want to see someone so promising held down by past actions that are not your fault." He shook his head as Anakin stared on, a little incredulous (watching this man work was always a lesson in and of itself).

"Nothing about your situation is *fair*, my boy. The circumstances in which you were born, the despicable entities who would subjugate others for their own personal gain… This is why I wanted to become Chancellor; to target things like this and put a stop to them! But… there are just so many obstacles in a corrupted Republic."

He sighed and turned to look out the window for a couple of minutes, gaze distant. Anakin took that time to go over everything the man had said and a sudden realization hit him. He'd never cared for democracy but… had that been him? Or had that been Palpatine planting seeds again – the Sith's *grooming*?

Had he really been that weak?

It took every ounce of will he had to not curse aloud.

He suddenly felt so vulnerable with just that realization… What else was not his idea? What else had he missed?! *What was he missing*

now?!

Suddenly, he needed to get out, but… he *couldn't*. The air seemed so oppressive, and was it just him or did the room seem smaller than it had a moment ago?

He squeezed his stress ball harder and reached for his mints with his other hand.

"Sorry," Palpatine said suddenly, cutting off Anakin's movement as the older man shook his head and smiled, albeit a bit weakly, "forgive an old man his ramblings, please. And… maybe this wouldn't be such a good idea to mention to anyone? I took this office prepared to fight for what I believe in, no matter the obstacles. I wouldn't want anyone to start having doubts in my leadership over a moment of weakness."

Anakin held himself as still as he could, then nodded. "Of course not, sir," he said, hating how weak he sounded.

"In any case, that will be all that is necessary this week, Anakin. Please be safe on your way back to the Temple?"

"Yes my Mas…" Anakin froze, body going even stiffer than it had been just moments before. He'd wanted to *appease* Palpatine in his panic. He cursed himself in multiple different languages silently while he waited for Palpatine's reaction.

The man just blinked. Then his eyes narrowed ever so slightly and Anakin's breath hitched.

He didn't know how long they sat there in the tense silence before the Chancellor deflated. "Anakin, you don't have to worry about being hurt here for a simple slip-up. That isn't how this office works… and by the time I'm done, it won't be how the Republic works either."

He said it with such conviction…

The liar.

Anakin just nodded his head, unwilling to say anything else and screw it up even more.

"I'll be seeing you next week then," the older man said gently, shooing Anakin off with a careful wave of his hand. "And don't forget about the upcoming Gala. I'm looking forward to introducing you to a couple of people."

The time traveler nodded stiffly before turning and forcing himself to walk to the door. He would be calm and professional. He would *not* panic. Not openly… He took one slow step after another towards the door, eyes focused on it. It felt like forever before he reached it.

He waited calmly for the door to open and then stepped out.

Once the durasteel slid shut behind him, though, he fled.

xXx

He didn't even go back to the temple that night. He went directly to the racing circuit and demanded he be put in every single race. Bleersh didn't seem to know what to think of that, and later Anakin realized the being must have been terribly confused. He hadn't seen his 'favorite racer' for a couple of weeks, after there had been an obvious confrontation, and then he just showed up and raced like a madman…

By the end of the racing night, Anakin had cooled down enough to lose a couple of races and even explained (in very vague terms) that he'd had a bad day and hadn't meant to worry Bleersh.

The manager had simply responded with one of the nicest things Anakin had ever had anyone say to him:

"Look, kid, I can't say I don't know what's going on in that temple of yours, but if you need a way off planet – no questions asked – come to me. I'll make sure even the Jedi can't find you." Anakin had been shocked. He'd checked for any underlying plans or hidden agendas through the Force, but only felt a truthful earnestness from the being.

It killed him that that had almost reduced him to tears. So much so, that he didn't trust himself to answer for several seconds. Here he sat, surrounded by dirt, grease, broken parts, grime and everything else that went with the dimness of the Coruscanti underworld, and yet he'd found someone so genuine as to offer him – a *Jedi initiate* – refuge. He'd be willing to fight the Jedi (albeit discreetly and likely only to an extent, but still) for him.

"Thank you, Bleersh," he said, feeling calmer than he had all day (not that that was a high bar, but it was definitely something). "You don't know how much that means to me." He went on to say that it hadn't been the Jedi who had shaken him so badly, but someone from the Senate. The gelatin-like being lost a lot of stiffness at that, relaxing in relief (probably that he wouldn't have to fight or dodge any Jedi after

all).

Anakin had thanked him again and promised to return soon before making his way back to the Temple, winnings from the night in hand. He'd reached about the half way point when he realized that his usual entrances would be more difficult to use as he hadn't left any open on his way out, seeing as he hadn't actually sneaked out of the temple initially. He did manage to get in through one particular entrance (that involved crawling through *more* vents, go figure) only to realize that he wouldn't be able to utilize that particular route for much longer as he would have grown too large. That realization was both a relief at him getting closer to his full adult height, and regret at losing one of his escape routes. Being small was annoying, but it had its perks.

He made it to the lower walkways of the temple halls before his adrenaline finally wore off and he almost crashed to the ground right then and there. Somehow, he made it back to his room and was out before his head hit the pillow.

xXx

Several knocks on his door woke him, and he looked up to see a… blur. Huh. Through the Force he could tell it was a Jedi, but not one he was familiar with… he thought. The blur stood in his open door cautiously.

"Oh, good," the blob of color said. "You're awake."

Anakin blinked at them, then decided he couldn't deal with them right now. So he groaned and rolled over.

"Initiate Skywalker? Are you well?"

"No," he muttered.

"Do you need to go to the healer's wing?"

"No," he said, annoyed. "Just rest."

A pause, then, "If you're sure. I'll bring you some food later."

Relief washed over him and he already felt himself drifting off again. "Thank you."

He didn't even remember hearing the door close.

xXx

When Anakin woke again, he felt both far better and far worse than he had in a long while. He felt well rested, but still tired and heavy, like he'd slept too long. He hated that feeling.

Cursing to himself, he grabbed his comm and flipped on the switch that would display the time. It was well after noon. He cursed some more as he rushed out of his quarters with a set of clean clothes and a towel under his arm. Thankfully, the other children were either at lunch or in classes and he had the refresher to himself.

He quickly cleaned up, dumped the dirty clothes in the proper receptacle and grabbed his bag filled with his school data pads and flimsies.

About half-way to his next class, he realized that he didn't have any classes as Master Yoda had taken him out for their 'special project'.

Unfortunately, that reminded him of Palpatine, which reminded him of his slip-up the day before, which had him crouching down and breathing heavily in the middle of the hallway. He'd almost called Palpatine his master – specifically '*My Master*', which was a very Sith thing to do. And if the man hadn't caught onto that, Anakin would eat his bag, data pads and all.

He'd ruined everything! All his hard work, all of Siri's hard work, all of Master Yoda's… Qui-gon and Obi-wan and…

"Kriff," he whispered to himself.

"Initiate?" a new, calm voice broke into his spiraling tirade and he looked up to see Jedi Master Labooda standing there, surprised. She had leaned over him, her dark hair spilling over her shoulder and brown eyes watching him in concern.

"Master Labooda," he said, standing up and wishing *desperately* that he hadn't almost broken down in the hallway; that he didn't *still* feel like breaking down right then and there

"Are you feeling well?" the woman asked, unsurely. Then she frowned, although it looked more puzzled than disapproving. "I know I don't teach you anymore, but shouldn't you be in class?"

Well, he could answer that last question in any case. "Master Yoda took me out of them for a research project."

The woman's dark eyebrows rose in surprise. "Master Yoda?"

It took him a moment to recognize how unusual that would be and then realized that he didn't have the energy to explain it without potentially slipping up.

"It's a long story." He may have sounded a little too tired when he said that.

Labooda nodded, although she didn't look appeased. Anakin could only be grateful she didn't press.

Just then, his stomach let out a long, loud growl and he remembered that he hadn't eaten in almost twenty four hours.

E chu ta.

Sometimes only the Hutt language could grasp the utter nastiness that fit a situation.

"Have you eaten lunch yet?" the older Jedi asked, the concern back on her face, although Anakin could see traces of amusement this time.

"No," he responded, sighing tiredly. He'd gotten enough sleep, he shouldn't be this tired already. *Especially* not in this body.

"I see. Well, I was on my way to the commissary, if you would like to accompany me."

Anakin opened his mouth to protest. He had to go find Master Yoda and keep going through the information from Dooku. But then he paused. He remembered Siri and his mind-healers stressing that he needed to take care of himself and his growing body. He bit his lip because that still felt like that should come second to taking Palpatine down but…

Finally he took a deep breath and nodded, trying to force a smile onto his lips (and likely only succeeding in looking pathetic). Then he glanced up at the older Jedi.

"Thank you, Master," he said politely. "I believe that would be best right now."

The woman's body language immediately loosened up as she smiled down at him.

"Well, your first gala is coming up in a couple of weeks, if I recall," she

said as she turned towards the commissary, not taking her eyes off of Anakin, as if he would vanish the moment she did. He fell into step beside her.

"Yes," he replied, not really wanting to think of the Senate right now, but also appreciating a topic he could grasp onto. "I am rather nervous about it." And hopefully she would attribute his near break-down to that and not, well, anything else.

"Why don't we go over some policies and procedures then?" she suggested. "I'll walk you through what to expect step by step and perhaps that will alleviate some of your anxiety?"

Anakin blinked. That was… actually very kind of her. Why was everyone being so kind to him lately? This hadn't happened before? (Or had he simply not been able to see it…?)

Shaking that thought from his head, he smiled up at her, this time far more real. "I would appreciate that, actually."

She returned his smile. "Well, you will probably want to start getting ready at least an hour before you leave, especially if you would like a sonic shower and time to meditate before a hectic evening. I highly recommend both as they tend to make stressful events go far more smoothly. Then you'll meet the other initiates near the Temple entrance as you will all be going together. You should arrive just after the gala has begun. Once there…"

She continued on, reiterating some of the points she'd hit in the class she'd taught and he listened to the small details raptly. Honestly, etiquette had never been so interesting to him.

Before he knew it, they'd gotten to the commissary, gotten their food and had both eaten a large lunch, over which he'd discussed the entire gala with the Jedi Master, up to and including any emergency plans that may be necessary. Surprisingly, it did help him feel much calmer about the gala especially, but also his life in general.

Once he finished his meal, he thanked her again, profusely, for her help and decided that he needed a little more time in the training salles before his mind-healing session in a couple of hours. If Master Yoda had let him sleep in all day, then he likely wouldn't mind that. And as much as Anakin (and Yoda) needed to get that information sorted and then to the right people, he also needed to train today.

He showed up to his mind-healing session with Master Xio feeling

much better after a hard work-out, but he knew he was teetering on the edge of dropping right back into a panic.

Anakin explained everything to his mind-healer, but didn't remember much about the session specifically other than Master Xio helping him see that he was overreacting and that even if Sidious *did* suspect something, he would have no *proof*. The worst thing he could do was try to kill Anakin, which (he informed a rather horrified and sad Xio) he could definitely handle. She hadn't been too happy about that but had reluctantly accepted that it did calm him down. He had left the session feeling the most at ease he had since seeing the Chancellor and felt as if he could actually face the world again. He smiled as he went to third meal to eat with his friends.

Just as he turned into the hall leading to the commissary, he received a text comment from Master Yoda on his comm. It stated that he hoped Anakin felt better and if he needed more time off, he could take some tomorrow. If not, Yoda would be in the study room with Girth the next day and he hoped that Anakin had slept well.

The time-traveler smiled at the message. He'd needed the time off today, more than he'd realized, but he hoped he wouldn't have problems tomorrow. Truthfully, he also hoped he could sleep tonight as he'd only woken up a couple of hours before. Perhaps he could stop by the training salles again? Probably wouldn't hurt.

"Anakin?" he paused not feet away from the cafeteria entrance and looked around spotting two people coming towards him; two people he hadn't really expected to be together and alone.

"Darra. Hale," he greeted both of his friends with a curious frown. "Is everything alright?"

The red-head and the larger boy glanced at each other before looking back at him.

"We… have something to ask you… and we thought it might not be a good idea to do so in the commissary," Darra said hesitantly.

Anakin felt his heart sink. Had they figured it out too?

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he nodded (hoping he didn't look as suddenly weary as he felt) and led them off to the side where he could see a far too familiar alcove. How many secrets had he discussed in this little area?

Once there, they all looked around and saw no one else near.

"What would you like to ask?" he said, resigned.

It was Hale who spoke this time. "Darra and I were talking and… well, we have a new theory. You know how you said you weren't a reincarnation of an ancient Jedi?"

"Yes…" the time-traveler said slowly, not sure where they were going with this.

The older boy nodded and seemed to steel himself. "If you weren't a Jedi… well… Anakin, were you a Sith?"

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thanks to Quathis and Khalthar for their help in this!

I kind of feel like this is not quite the follow-up I really WANT to post, but it really is necessary... a bit of the 'calm before the storm', I suppose, although that should still apply for the next couple of chapters.

A lot of people have said they'd be interested in what happened with Jango and Siri. Unfortunately, that is not within the scope of this fic. There will be updates from them and their part is still important, but I can't really fit it in and justify it within the bounds of the story. I AM thinking about writing a short fic with them, but honestly, this fic is already stretching the limits of my burnout and I don't want to really push it, you know? So... maybe?

Either way, thank you for reading. I really do appreciate it. :)

Discord: https://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin wasn't sure what to think of the two children standing before him looking nervous and worried, eyes fixed on him as they waited for his answer.

"*Were you a Sith?"*

Just…

What?!

How had they come to that (all too correct) conclusion?!

He shook his head as he tried to wrap his mind around how they'd figured that out.

Finally, he could only ask, "What?" in a sort of croaky voice that barely left his throat.

The two children looked at each other again, and Anakin could feel the nervousness pouring off of them.

This time, Darra spoke, shifting in place worriedly. Were they afraid of him?

(Could he blame them?)

"Well… um, we were talking about the different theories Thoran has and the ones you said weren't true – like the one about you having the knowledge of an ancient Jedi Master… but you seem to think you're a monster and kept insisting on it and then Coira said you were *our* monster, like you still are or are still affected by something negative, and Hale said you got sad some times, which I noticed too, and it isn't like *normal* sad, but deeper and older and so we thought that… um… maybe it's because you weren't a Jedi in your past life that you remember but a Sith."

She winced and snapped her mouth closed, as if she'd just realized she'd been rambling.

"Or maybe a Dark Jedi, or from one of the dark cults," Hale spoke, his voice deep and quiet for his age. Then he glanced over at Darra, his gray eyes meeting hers pointedly. "People who use the Force aren't just Jedi and Sith."

"R-right," she said, her voice small as she shrunk in on herself a little. Then she glanced at Anakin and perked up in panic. "Not that we meant anything rude or cruel by it! We just wanted to put it forth as an option is all! And even if you were, it doesn't mean we won't be your friends! I promise!"

Had this happened a couple of months ago, Anakin would have been floored. Now, he was just… kind of surprised (and his heart a little warmed).

"You would still be my friend if I was a Sith?"

Darra's face colored, almost hiding her freckles, and she shook her head as Hale frowned. "N-no! I mean, not if you were one now or became one in the future, but… um…"

"If you are here now, and that is your past, you're trying to get better," Hale said. "Thus, if that is your past – or something like it – then we don't care."

"Exactly," Darra said, relieved as she nodded eagerly.

Anakin just couldn't seem to compute the idea of all these children knowing about his past and still *not caring*. It was like they hadn't run across any Jedi dogma at all.

And they just sat there in silence while Anakin wondered how he had missed all of these people the first time around. Well, maybe not Darra, but he certainly hadn't had the kind of respect for her that he did now and—

"Well?" the girl in question asked, having gone from shuffling to outright twitchy. "Do you have memories of being a… darksider?"

Anakin wanted to sigh. He had promised that he'd tell them if they guessed correctly. And while they *implied* that it had been a different life, their words had not. He was pretty sure they hadn't meant it like that, but they'd stumbled across a way to corner him.

"Yes."

The two looked flabbergasted. They hadn't expected him to answer in the affirmative, he supposed.

"Although it is more complicated than that and I cannot tell you more."

The two nodded, looking a little dazed. Hale's pale eyes had lost their focus and Darra's face had gone terribly white in contrast to her flushing earlier, making her freckles stand out starkly on her face.

And Anakin had been through enough of these little revelations that he knew he had to head a couple of things off.

"Let me address a couple of things. First, yes, Master Yoda knows, as do my mind healers. Maelee and Coira as well. Second, you *cannot* discuss it without mine or one of the Masters' permission. I cannot stress this enough. Thirdly, yes, it is possible to come back from the dark side, but *extremely* difficult – to a point of nigh impossibility, but not actual impossibility. Fourthly, I'm reiterating to you that there is more to this that I cannot tell you."

The two initiates looked at each other and then back at him, nodding slowly. They may have said they'd accept him, and he believed they'd try, but they still looked very worried.

He sighed. "How about we speak with Master Yoda tomorrow morning? Would that help?"

The other two blinked for a couple of moments before Darra slowly nodded her head. Then Hale, who looked thoughtful, gave one firm nod.

"Wow… this is… I mean… I didn't think we were actually *right*," the red-head said softly. "I am so sorry, Anakin."

He raised one eyebrow in question. "Sorry for what?" For uncovering part of his secret?

"That you have those memories."

For several seconds, he could only stare at her.

Then he managed a weak smile. "Me too. Although having these memories will help me save a lot of people… I hope." He really, *really* hoped.

"That's why you're researching with Master Yoda, isn't it?" Hale asked, gray eyes lighting up in recognition. "Because you have more memories about the dark side and the Sith than we really have any knowledge of today!"

Well… "You're not wrong." They were missing some pretty significant nuance, but he wasn't about to clarify.

"Um… can I… hug you?" Darra asked suddenly, looking a little sheepish.

Anakin blinked. He… well, honestly, he… wouldn't mind… he supposed.

"Um… sure?" he said, perhaps a little hesitantly.

She smiled and carefully stepped forward, then wrapped her arms around him, making sure to broadcast her movements the entire way. It was a surprisingly nice hug, with her arms around his neck and she didn't feel stiff but still seemed firm and…

He didn't think he'd ever had a hug like that from a peer before. Coira hugged him, but hers always seemed… well… desperate, perhaps. Or just enthusiastic? Maelee wasn't one to really hug people, although she had placed a hand on his shoulder in solidarity. But this… this was nice. She was trying to reassure him, obviously, but there was something more to it – something firmer. Like she was happy to be there for him to lean on.

Then he felt a large hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Hale smiling down at him. It was a soft, warm smile and…

Stang. He really did have great friends.

(That would *never* stop being strange.)

"Well, now that that's over and done with, let's go get food!" Darra said suddenly, stepping back and grinning up at both of them.

Anakin couldn't help but smile back. "Yeah."

xXx

The conversation between Hale, Darra and Master Yoda went rather well, in all actuality. Anakin had informed Coira and Maelee in private about what the other two had confronted him with, and then

they'd gone to First meal. Once finished there, he'd taken Darra and Hale with him to speak with Master Yoda. The fact that Girth had been there as well was just icing on the cake. Both of the initiates had agreed to keep their knowledge quiet and left with thoughtful expressions and promises to see Anakin at Second or Third meal.

"I don't remember them being this amazing," the time-traveler said once the door had closed.

Yoda hummed in amusement. "Surprise you, younglings will. The more you look, see more you will."

Girth had nodded in agreement. "A lot of new revelations regarding them are you actively trying to figure them out and applying what you find to yourself, making you a better person too."

Anakin snorted and glanced wryly at both of them. "The fact that I'm far older and have more experience has nothing to do with it?"

"Always grant wisdom, age does not," Yoda pointed out. Anakin couldn't say he was wrong. But before he could say anything else, the old troll sat forward and began to type on his holoscreen. "Now come, sort through more information, we must. Needed, this is."

Anakin just shook his head in amusement and took his own seat.

They took lunch in that room as they usually did, making comments and jotting down points of interest they found. Once Third Meal time came, Anakin was dismissed to go and then given permission to train in the salles for the rest of the evening afterwards.

He took full advantage of that (despite the mild stomach ache he got for training right after eating). He even managed to drag his group of friends down there to give them more instruction. It amazed him how much just teaching the basics to others and helping them focus on getting better helped him get better…

For the next several days, he found few variations to that routine. He would get up, eat First Meal with his friends, then head off to sort more information, eat Third Meal with his friends and then train until bed. He, Yoda and Girth had come across some pretty obvious issues and incriminating evidence in the form of private missives and orders. It almost made Anakin weep with relief that they finally, *finally* had the proof he'd wanted for so long. And they still hadn't gone through more than a third of it.

Of course, that brought up the point of what they should *do* with it. Anakin wanted to turn the information over to a couple of Senators he knew were trustworthy, mainly Organa and Mothma (although getting it to the latter would be a little trickier as he'd only met the woman once and going to her world's offices on a whim could draw unwanted attention to both of them – but he had some ideas around that problem).

Yoda wanted to go before the Council. Anakin didn't. Unsurprisingly, it was Girth who came up with a compromise.

"Why not do both?"

Both he and the Grandmaster had just stared at him for several seconds as he shook his head.

"Getting the information *out there* is the important thing. Having several methods of doing so is the best idea." He paused, then nodded at what ever he'd thought before continuing. "I know a couple of people who are trustworthy. They wouldn't be good at getting the information to the public, but they would be good at keeping it safe. I can give you their information so you can vet them yourself, Master Yoda," he said to the old master.

Funny how these two were about the same height and yet seemed so much larger than their diminutive size somehow.

"Appreciate that, I would," Yoda said with a nod.

"So we'll have to format data disks for the Senators and you'll be presenting it to the Council?" Anakin asked, wanting clarification.

"No," Master Yoda responded with a look in his eye that Anakin didn't like. "Want *you* to present it, I do."

Another long silence with only blinking and staring. Then, "What? Why?" Anakin asked, incredulous.

"Help them trust you, it will," the Grandmaster said.

Anakin just opened his mouth, then closed it, and opened it again, then looked over at Girth for help.

"If you're feeling up to it, I think it's a good idea," the drall said slowly. "It would help you to confront some of your own problems with trust and the Jedi."

Well… he wasn't *wrong* but still…

"Think about it," Girth said placatingly. "If you really don't want to do it, we'll discuss it. I don't want to make you do it, right, Master Yoda?"

The old Master held up his hands as if in surrender. "Listen to your judgment on this, I will."

The drall nodded firmly, looking pleased. "Good." Then he turned back to Anakin. "Will you think about it seriously?"

The time-traveler frowned, but nodded.

He would think on it although he knew even that would be difficult. The idea of going before the Council made him physically ill, but just because it was *hard* didn't mean he *couldn't* do it, or that he shouldn't. And Girth thought it would be a good idea…

But he couldn't bring himself to commit… which annoyed him more than it probably should. He'd never had a problem committing to his decisions before…

He was glad when Siri called on an intergalactic comm channel to update him on everything almost an hour later, once they'd all gone back to sorting data. He'd happily excused himself to the com station and taken the call.

She wanted to touch base with him and he asked for an update as well. Siri informed him that she and Jango had some leads and were following a couple of trails that looked promising, but he could tell she was too worried to really be truly hopeful about any of them. She didn't tell him *where* any of the leads were, and he didn't ask. If something happened, she'd get the information he needed to him.

She still grumbled about her current partner every couple of sentences. He found it amusing that she'd gone from outright insults to grudging respect for the bounty hunter and wondered what Jango thought of her now.

After that, he summarized his own week, informing her that some more children had figured out some of his 'secrets', and that he'd give more thorough details when she got back. He also said that his and Master Yoda's project was coming along, albeit slowly, and then told her, in the special sign-language that had been created for the clones just after the war started, that he was afraid he'd compromised himself to 'the enemy'. She was quiet for a while after that, but then asked if

he needed her back. He could see the conflict in her eyes over whether to come back or not, and he couldn't bring himself to make her do it. Yes, her presence would be solid and grounding, but he couldn't ask her to give up Ferus like that.

So he shook his head, signed to her that the other party had no proof and he should be fine.

He was honestly just grateful she didn't tell him he was overreacting.

This was, after all, Palpatine.

She wished him well, then he did the same and they cut contact. She'd get in touch again when she had a chance next.

Right now, though, he couldn't worry about her, because had to get back to work. They *would* get this all sorted in time to do something about it.

He, Master Yoda and Girth sorted information until Third Meal as usual.

xXx

Anakin walked down the hallway leisurely, mind on his recent training session. He was getting better, and he knew it. Once his body had gotten in shape, his skill level had risen exponentially. As of right now, it was just a matter of drilling his body to be in sync with his mind and what he remembered. While he still wasn't as good as he wanted to be, he was getting to a point where he felt he could hold his own against more or less anyone, up to and including Yoda. The fact that he'd been focusing exclusively on training either his body or his Force abilities when he wasn't sorting data may have helped there. Also, the Grandmaster had come and sparred with him now that he didn't have Siri around, and that had helped immensely as well.

Things weren't perfect, but they were progressing positively and that gave him more hope than he'd thought he could have. It both relaxed and excited him that they had a plan that could work.

Unfortunately, he would have to go to see Palpatine again in two days. Tomorrow he would have another mind-healing session. The day after that, he'd go to the Senate. The day after that, another mind-healing session. Then at the end of next week, they would have the gala. He could really only hope they would have the information ready by that time. They had plans, after all.

Well… he had plans that included the time up to the gala. After that, though… All he could really do at that point would be to wait. He hated waiting. It left him feeling lazy and inadequate – like there was something else he *should* be doing. And when it came to this, he doubted that feeling was wrong.

Girths' words from earlier that week came back to him. *Why not do both*? He bit his lip as he thought. If he made plans to go before the Council after the gala, that would definitely give him something to focus on… but he still didn't *want* to. Still… perhaps it was time to put that behind him.

Between that train of thought and the realization that the next couple of weeks would prove to be… difficult, he was contemplating going racing tonight to cope. He hated his mind running around in circles like that.

Someone calling his name broke through his thoughts, and he welcomed the distraction.

"Initiate Skywalker. Could I have a word?"

He glanced back to see one Adi-Gallia. She wore a serene smile on her face as she walked leisurely towards him, her robes swaying gently with her graceful movements. He still frowned in puzzlement as he couldn't think of a reason she would want to speak with him… unless she'd heard from Siri? But he'd just spoken to her the other day. Or was she there on behalf of the Council? He didn't think so… but then, why?

"Master Gallia," he said with a bow. Then he stood and couldn't help but eye her warily. "Have you heard from Siri? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no," the taller woman shook her head. Even in the artificial light of the Temple, her skin had a healthy, bronze glow that made her look particularly serene and steady. Or was that just her Force presence?

The woman smiled. "I was actually wondering if perhaps you had heard from her recently."

Oh. That made sense. But he hadn't heard from Siri for a couple of days now. So he shook his head.

"Can you sense anything over your bond with her?" the older woman asked.

Anakin blinked but didn't see a reason to deny her that. He closed his eyes and focused. Almost immediately he got a sense of the blond. Siri seemed… focused. He could sense worry and concern along with an underlying rage that startled (and worried) him a little, but otherwise…

"She's fine," he said with a firm nod.

Adi seemed relieved. "Good. I'm glad to hear it."

"I as well," Anakin said, making a mental note to tell Siri to contact her master. "Is there anything else you would like to speak on?"

To his surprise she nodded, and smiled again – a carefree, almost excited smile. "First, I would like to thank you for your concern regarding my former padawan. She can be… worrying at times, especially with her recent illness added into the equation."

Didn't he know it. So he nodded as she continued.

"But your actions and obvious concern put my heart at ease regarding my most recent decision."

Anakin blinked. "Decision?" he asked, wariness back in his voice.

Adi took a breath, as if preparing herself. Oh… oh, no…

"Anakin Skywalker, I, Jedi Master Adi-Gallia, would like to formally ask if you would like to become my Padawan."

Was it bad that his first thought was, 'You have *got* to be kidding'? He really did feel like the universe's punchline right now.

His second thought wasn't really a thought, but more of a melt-down, or his brain shutting down because… "What?" he managed to croak out.

The woman held up her hands, as if expecting his reaction (was he getting predictable?!) and spoke calmly, her words clear and precise.

"I realize this may feel a little out of the blue, but let me present my reasoning. The first regards Siri and the bond you two share. I don't doubt she would be a good master for you, but she is young and – whether she agrees with it or not – still recovering to an extent. I will admit, I was expecting her to take you as a padawan once you turned twelve, but with this recent sabbatical she's taken, and she said she

didn't know when or if she would be able to return, that no longer seems to be the case. Besides, stepping in as a Master who has more experience may be more beneficial to you and her both, in the long run, seeing as you are such good friends and you would be able to remain so without the potential complication of a Master/Padawan relationship.

"Second, I wanted to offer you this as a thank you to everything you've done for her. I can tell you are a loyal friend and a hard worker simply from that observation and I have been greatly impressed, especially as when I first heard of the situation I… was rather distressed. But you have helped her with her strange visions and relapses to a point where I don't think anyone else could have.

"That brings me to my third point. I would like to observe this bond you two seemingly have. I won't lie and say that it doesn't intrigue me. You may find this cold or calculating, but I want to put forth all of the information and motivations I have. I don't believe in coercing and would prefer to be candid."

Anakin appreciated that. He did. But his head was swimming. This would have honestly been his dream initially as a padawan – so many people asking him to train under them – but now… now he just kind of wanted it all to go away. Still, he could bring himself to say nothing as she went on.

"My fourth point? I am on the Council and already have a basis to work from when it comes to your current and past mind-healing sessions. While the details have not been made known to the Council, we do know – very generally – the progress you have made. I have some past experiences in mind-healing myself and thus think I would be in a position to support your growth there. Also, the Council is… growing restless. They know you have some information on the Sith and while we do need it as soon as possible, having a liaison on the Council as a go-between who can advocate for you and make sure you are treated fairly while still understanding the Council's needs will likely put everyone in a better situation and more at ease.

"And lastly…" she paused, her smile growing a bit sad. "Siri trusts you – with a fervor I've rarely seen. At first, she didn't seem like she wanted anything to do with you, but as she's gotten to know you, I have little doubt she would trust you with her life, now. That is no small thing to me. I would like the chance to get to know you as well, Initiate Skywalker. As I feel this would be beneficial for both of us, I decided to approach you and let you decide."

Finally she seemed to be done and took a deep breath. Then she handed over a data pad. "Here are all my points in a presentation. I tend to be a very organized person and that may also be something you need to take into account."

Blankly, Anakin took the powered-down pad and looked down at it for several seconds before looking back up at her.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked.

He blinked, his mind still rebooting.

Times like this, he *really* missed his older body, mutilated or not.

All he could really get out at that point was an, "Are… you sure?"

To his surprise, she burst into laughter. After a few moments, she calmed down but smiled at him fondly. It reminded him of Siri's smile.

"Oh, Anakin, you're a good kid. I know that Siri would be devastated if we just let you go and honestly, so would I. I know we're not the only ones, too."

"What if I choose to go to the corps instead?" he asked slowly.

Her smile dimmed, but she nodded softly. "Then that will be your choice and we will respect it, but I wanted to make sure you had all options available to choose from. I know you have a… dark past, but you have already overcome so much of it. You are a wonderful person, Anakin, and if you leave, this Order will be poorer for it."

He… really wasn't so sure on that. (That thought may very well be the largest understatement that had ever crossed his mind.)

Still… her words were sincere and heartfelt. That alone warmed him. He couldn't just outright dismiss her without giving her offer due thought.

On top of that, her open demeanor and candid support seemed to have given him the push he needed to decide that he would do as Yoda wished. He would go before the Council after the gala.

"I… thank you for the offer," he started, but she held up a hand before he could go further.

"You do not have to give me an answer now. It is just something to consider. And please don't feel pressured into making a choice. I will

not be offended no matter which choice you make."

Anakin closed his mouth, looked at the data pad, and then back up at her again.

"No, I was going to sincerely thank you, Master Gallia," he said with another bow. "For your consideration, for your thoughts and for your encouraging words. You've given me more today than you realize."

She smiled at him, surprised. Then she bowed a little to him. "Thank you for *your* consideration, Initiate Skywalker."

Then she straightened, beaming at him brightly. "Would you mind if I walked you back to the crèche?"

He couldn't help but smile at her. "I would like that."

She fell into step beside him as he turned to continue on his way.

"I am a little surprised to see you alone at this time," she commented. "Especially as the last time I spoke with you, you had quite the group of friends around you ready to defend you from me."

So, she wanted some small talk? Normally he hated that, but this seemed easier and freer than the small talk he usually had to engage in. Like she really was interested in what he had to say. It was… refreshing. Especially as she was one of those Jedi who still seemed to think of him as an actual child.

"Well, I did just come from the training salles."

"Oh? What form are you working on?"

"Form Five, actually, both Shien and Djem So."

They continued in a similar vein until she dropped him off at his crèche floor. Once there, they bowed to each other and he thanked her for her time. He remembered having to interact with her in the past, before she'd died in the Clone Wars. She'd always seemed so… well, stiff, he supposed? But in a cool, regal way, not in a Mace Windu kind of way. He'd never seen this warm, encouraging side to her.

So… what else had he missed about the other Council members? About the Jedi in general? It was both a welcoming and unsettling thought.

She bid him a good sleep, warned him to go to bed as soon as possible

and left him in the capable hands of his current crèche master.

Unbeknownst to her, he sneaked right back out again half an hour later.

Chapter End Notes

AAAAAAND we'll try that again. *ahem* This was accidentally posted at the end of Dangers of Foresight.

My bad.

Thanks to Quathis, Khalthar and Hidden50 for their help on this!

Discord: discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One thing Sheev Palpatine never missed if at all possible was his planning time – minutes to hours where he would simply sit and *think*. Admittedly, that time became more and more difficult to schedule in as his term as Chancellor went on and the demands on his time became more and more insistent, but there were just too many instances he'd witnessed regarding people who didn't take the time to think things over, and he attributed a lot of his success – both in the Senate and as a Sith – to this practice. So he made sure that he had time.

Today, he'd been able to schedule that time, and thank the Force too as he wanted to think on one Anakin Skywalker before he met the child again in a couple of days. At first, Palpatine thought the Order had sent the child to be his 'Ambassador' because he'd met the Chancellor before. It hadn't taken him long to recognize the boy from Naboo; the child who had seemed to have some interesting mental shields. He'd checked once he'd recognized the boy, but couldn't seem to find anything deeper than what he expected for a child of his age and background, and couldn't really pry without giving himself away, even to said child, so he filed it away for later contemplation.

Then he'd looked more deeply into Skywalker and his background, and he'd found the *perfect* candidate for his apprentice. A former slave in a new culture, who seemed to be powerful and respectful – already trained in many areas that pleased Palpatine. Respectful, if a little too cautious, and just starting on his journey to learn more about the Force… he couldn't have been given a more perfect potential apprentice. It was as if the Force had gift-wrapped the child just for him.

However, there was just… *something* about Skywalker that rang warning bells in Palpatine's mind. It bothered him that he could never truly pin down *why* until the boy had slipped.

My Master.

Oh, sure, he'd cut it off, but that had been what he would have said. To anyone else, that meant nothing. It could even be passed off as a

product of his slave background (which was what he'd turned to to keep the child from panicking). But it was such a *Sith* thing to do and suddenly, the child's perfection made sense. It really was too good to be true.

He had to be a plant. By Vader. At first he'd thought Dooku, as the man had originally been a Jedi and would have been in a prime position to place a plant, but the timeline didn't match up. And no one else would care enough to infiltrate the Jedi like Skywalker had. Although, *how* Vader had gotten a child into the Jedi Temple, Palpatine didn't know and had to give his grudging respect. What was worse, he seemed to have figured out (*somehow*) that Palpatine was a Sith. His current bet was on a vision – the kind his clouding of the Force wouldn't affect as that would only hinder the lightsiders. The fact that the child had become his Ambassador was either extremely fortuitous or so meticulously planned that Vader had to have Jedi spies of his own.

So Palpatine had checked, double checked, and triple checked his own tracks, but could find nothing. No where that anyone could have gotten any information. Even Dooku seemed to be at a loss.

(He'd checked Dooku too, but could find nothing truly suspicious from the man. Only the usual reluctance of a newly turned Jedi. Of course, Sith were *always* suspicious, so he'd keep an eye on his new apprentice, but as far as he was concerned, he'd hit a dead end.)

He just didn't know how Vader did it. And it had to be Vader. The man who had replaced his limbs with mechanics. The vision Palpatine had extracted from the bounty hunter was a truly imposing figure, dressed all in black with a skull-like mask, cape and red lightsaber. According to Dooku, he was also Luke Lars, but the former Jedi had insisted Lars wasn't human with the proportions of his limbs. Or, at least, not fully human. But if Vader had replaced his human-proportioned mechanical limbs with something else to throw people off… to hide from the Jedi and the current Sith until his plans came to fruition…

Yes, he was truly a masterful manipulator himself. A Sith far too much like Palpatine for either of them to ever truly work together. No… Vader had to go. He was just too much of a danger. And the best way to get to him would be through his spy. However, he would have to be cautious, lull the child into a false sense of security and then strike. Yes. He would see how loyal the child was to his true master…

Palpatine smiled cruelly, looking forward to the prospect of finishing this Dejarik match and watching as his enemies realized just how badly they'd lost. Sidious had always been able to turn set-backs into strengths that only supported him and pushed him higher.

This time, of course, would be no different.

xXx

"Wait… she did *what*?" Siri asked, shocked.

Anakin chuckled, half in his own residual surprise and half in amusement at the older blond's reaction. "That was very similar to my reaction," he said.

"But… what brought this on, and why did she think this was a good idea? When she asked me she…" She faded off for a moment, then put a hand to the bridge of her nose. "Don't tell me she actually made a presentation for you too."

The initiate shrugged helplessly.

"Oh, Force, she did," she put her head in her hands. "Master…" she groaned.

Anakin didn't really know what to say to that, so he said nothing.

"And she truly wants you to become her *Padawan*?" Siri finally said tiredly.

"Apparently."

A pause as Siri processed that. "This is what, your fifth offer?"

"I've lost count."

"Liar."

Anakin snorted mirthlessly. "I don't like to think about it."

Siri looked up at him again, frown on her lips. "Why not?"

"I don't like the attention."

The older blond's puzzlement didn't abate. "You love attention."

Anakin made sure he didn't wince. "Correction," he held up a finger, "I

used to. Way back when I needed people to acknowledge my value because I equated that with the probability of my ability to continue breathing. Slave mind set." He tapped his temple pointedly, then paused. "It's… frustrating, I suppose, that I do not need acknowledgment now, and that is when I receive it. Receiving attention does not serve my purpose while being here, and I do not want it. Unlike when I came here originally… and could never seem to receive acknowledgment, no matter how hard I tried."

It was Siri's turn to remain silent.

Finally, she decided to venture carefully. "Have you spoken to… our resident Drall and Master Xio about this?"

He sighed, deflating. "No. Not yet. I'll… bring it up later today."

Siri nodded, looking relieved.

Anakin decided that was enough about him. "How about you? How are you faring?"

"We've found his trail," she said, hard determination snapping over her features. Her blue holocom image sat straighter.

The former slave's breath caught in his chest. Another child they could rescue from slavery if all went well. "Good."

"It will still most likely take some time," she said softly, looking off to the side.

"Of course," Anakin replied.

"Do you think *he* knows Fett and I are working together?" she asked suddenly, frowning.

The younger time-traveler blinked. "Why would he care?"

"It's Fett and he's…" she sighed and slumped, looking almost petulant. "He's good at what he does."

Anakin grinned, amused. "I am glad I recorded this."

Siri gasped. "You wouldn't dare show anyone."

The smaller blond just grinned wider.

"Don't think I don't have my own blackmail on you, Skywalker. Some

adorable holo-pictures with you and a certain Togruta."

Anakin blinked. "You took *pictures*?"

Siri's grin looked positively feral. "Yes."

Huh. He… actually kind of wanted to see those. A little. Because Ahsoka would like them, of course.

"Fine, I won't show this to Fett," he said, sighing overly-dramatically, then broke down into chuckles as Siri did the same on the other end.

After a couple of seconds, he sobered. "Back to the question, doesn't Fett have free reign to do as he pleases until he has to attend to his duties in the future…" he paused, just for the sake of anyone who could be listening, even if he doubted anyone was, "whatever they are. Has he said anything about that?"

Siri's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, acknowledging that she'd caught on, and she shrugged. "Something about teaching the next generation. I think it's a Mandalorian thing."

"Ah," Anakin nodded sagely. "In any case, I still think this is below *him*. He just has too many other things to really care about."

Siri nodded, her relief back. "I'll keep an eye out anyway, but that is good to hear."

Anakin nodded again. Then he noticed the time. "I have to go to my session, but thank you for talking with me, Knight Tachi."

"Any time, Initiate Skywalker," she replied, smiling warmly.

"Um… before you go… do you think I should… accept your Master's offer?" he asked, realizing he hadn't gotten an answer from her.

She fell quiet for several seconds before speaking hesitantly. "I… really can't tell you one way or another. Every Jedi who has offered apprenticeship has their good points and would be of help… but you would have to tell them everything if you did accept."

Anakin sighed, shoulders slumping. "I'm planning on telling the entire Council everything anyway."

Siri choked. "Wait, what?!"

The former Sith rolled his eyes. "My… furry mentor thinks it would be

a good opportunity to begin to build my trust again. Master Yoda has wanted it from the get go."

"Oh," was all she said, very unhelpfully.

"So I should wait until after I tell them before I make a choice, I suppose."

Siri blinked, still looking a little overwhelmed. Then she nodded. "Yes, that sounds wise."

He returned the gesture. "Then I will wait."

She smiled. "You really have changed. Have a good evening, Anakin."

"You too, Siri," he said with a smile of his own. Then reached over and cut the call off.

As he exited the booth and made his way towards the Healer's wing, he realized that the weight on his shoulders felt both heavier and lighter somehow, after that call. He wasn't entirely sure why or how, but he did find it curious.

He really hoped Siri came back soon.

xXx

"I just do not understand it," Anakin said testily, letting his frustration show. "Last time they could not get rid of me fast enough and absolutely hated everything I did! This time, they *know* about my… past with the dark side, even if in only the vaguest terms, and I'm getting offers to train left, right and center!"

Across from him, Girth looked on sympathetically, but said nothing, so Anakin continued.

"Why is every entity I cross so utterly different than in my memories? Even I cannot have made a difference that reaches that widely or deeply! Are my memories that corrupted? Or was I simply so self-centered last time that I could not see these people for who they truly are?!"

The drall raised an eyebrow pointedly. "First of all, did you know you stop using contractions when you get upset?"

The time-traveler blinked because no, he hadn't noticed. But… that made a painful kind of sense.

"Secondly," the drall continued, "I don't think you know people for who they really are now, even. You simply have more information. As for why? I don't think it's nearly as simple as that."

Anakin frowned. "What do you mean?

Girth pursed his lips and tipped his head to one side, nose whiskers twitching as he thought. "Let me start with the basics and we can build from there to make sure we're on the same page.

"Here is an analogy that may apply: A man in a way-station on a planet with colonies doing very well sees a new family. While buying supplies and fueling their ship, the head of the family tells the man that they're moving in and asks what the people on this new planet are like.

"The man thinks about that for a second and then asks, 'What were the people like on the planet you come from?'

"The family head replies that they were a close-knit community full of kind and caring people. The man replies, 'You'll find pretty much the same around here.' The family thanks him and heads off.

"A couple of days later, another family in the same situation comes to the way-station and the family head asks the same man the same question. The man asks the family head what the people were like on the planet they'd just come from, again.

"The family head has nothing but complaints about how stand-offish, rude and cruel people from their old planet were.

"The man says, 'You'll find pretty much the same around here.'"

Anakin thought about that for a moment after Girth finished his little story, trying to find a point to apply. "So you think the deciding factor *is* me?"

"To an extent," Girth replied calmly. "But not like you're thinking, I suspect. You treat people differently now than you did in the past – if the same people in the same situations are being treated in different ways, of *course* there will be differences, if only because they're reacting to you, and they will react differently.

"But you also treat *yourself* differently, and people pick up on that. Especially Jedi, I suspect.

"Now, the analogy I just spoke of only goes so far because there are very welcoming communities and very stand-offish communities no matter who you are or your past. But there is something to be said for different kinds of communities attracting different kinds of people. Sapients will treat other sapients in the only ways they know how, but a lot of that tends to rely on how they see you, how *you* see you, and how others (or society) see you. Hence, not as simple as you are making it out to be.

"Either the Masters who have spoken with you are seeing traits they like that they think they can nurture, or they are seeing traits they *don't* like that must be discouraged. Probably both."

Well… that did make sense. "They also probably don't want me going off on my own," he muttered, a little cynically. "Out of their control."

"Probably," Girth replied with a shrug. "But would you want an unknown, partially-trained child with a dark past to go off on their own if it wasn't you?"

Anakin winced.

"Or any child?" the drall corrected himself, looking thoughtful.

Well, he had a point.

"Besides," Girth continued, "the differences you're seeing are probably a combination of all of the above: How others see you, how you see you, your memories and those filters you had both then and now, the fact that children at your age are still very ego-centric and you may not have had the ability to look past that the first time. Currently, your sheer knowledge and memories have made up for that this time around, but your circumstances are rather… unique."

"Hmm," Anakin replied thinking about the mind-healer's words. Was that honestly why everyone seemed so different? Because *he* was different? Or simply because he had a broader perspective and could see more? Because he knew what to look for far more than he had at this age initially?

"Ego-centric?" he finally asked, a little warily.

"Oh, yes," the drall nodded. "With how the human brain develops, it's very difficult for children to understand something that does not revolve around them. That is often why a sign of maturity is being able to see other people's hardships and trials outside of how they

react to you. You've mentioned how you have a hard time reacting how you would have as an adult due to your brain development? It is the same concept."

"Oh."

Before Anakin could say anything else, a knock on the door sounded.

"We'll continue this later, if you'd like," Girth said with a smile.

Anakin nodded, kind of glad their mini-session had come to a close so quickly.

"Enter!" the drall called out.

The door opened to reveal Master Xio and Yoda. The two masters strode in serenely, greeted the other two and took their own seats.

"I hope we weren't interrupting anything," the older woman said once she'd seated herself.

"Nothing we cannot come back to later," Girth replied with a wave of his paw.

"Good," Master Xio said approvingly, nodding at both her fellow mind-healer and Anakin.

"To business, we should get, then, hmm?" Master Yoda asked calmly.

"Yes, yes, of course," Girth said, then turned to Anakin. "So, you have decided to tell the Council everything – about your past and Palpatine."

The time-traveler closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. The suggestion still made him terribly uneasy. He acknowledged the emotion and then released it to the Force before opening his eyes again.

"Yes."

"Happy, they will not be, if learn, they do, that leaked information, you have."

Anakin nodded. "I'm sure, but… this is a step towards trusting them. That doesn't mean I trust them now."

The diminutive master nodded, but his ears drooped. The initiate tried

not to wince. He didn't want to disappoint Master Yoda like that, but… this wasn't negotiable. He wanted that information with the right people.

"This really is an improvement, Master," Xio said quietly, but firmly.

Master Yoda nodded. "Know this, I do." Then he turned to Anakin, "Proud of you, I am. Truly."

"You're just not looking forward to the fallout," the white-haired woman stated wryly.

A snort from the Grandmaster and he shot a reproving – although not very serious – glare at the other Jedi. "I am not. Create more problems than it solves, I think it will." He shook his head, then turned to stare back at Anakin. "A Jedi matter, the Sith are. Involved, we should be."

The time-traveler frowned and cocked his head to one side. There was something to that… what…? Wait…

"You think I'm approaching this like an internal Sith dispute."

Silence met him. Then a soft, "Are you?" from Master Xio.

The question from them hurt, a little, and he wanted to push back against that, but he stopped himself and took a breath, thinking about it. He respected them enough to do that at least.

Was he?

Eventually he shook his head. "No. If I did that, I would not have told anyone." The fact that he might have handled it as an internal Sith matter initially and may have continued in that vein had he not been so… *encouraged* to speak about his problems was a mental note he made, but one he was sure the others had made too.

He was choosing to share this *now*, with all the implications that entailed. He was not treating this like a Sith would.

Master Xio and Girth both smiled at him warmly. Master Yoda studied him intently.

Anakin met his gaze steadily. "The Jedi may be legally in charge of any disputes with the Sith, but it has been *centuries* since they last had to deal with them and their machinations. Sith are *not* just dark Jedi, but last time the order *treated* them that way until they were forced to

do otherwise.

"Currently, I am the most qualified person to handle the situation and… I need to see this through. Not due to Sith teachings—" because in some ways his actions did align with Sith teachings, but in many other ways they didn't, "–but for absolution. I need to make sure this is done and done well. As much as I find it difficult to move away from the idea that if you want something done correctly, you need to do it yourself, I am working past that. I will give the end of this project to other people – people I *know* I can trust. Not people I am trying to establish trust with."

"And if disagree, the Council does?"

Anakin shrugged. "Then they can disagree."

"Feel used, they will," Yoda pointed out.

"Maybe," the time-traveler replied, but then shrugged again, "but they're not entirely wrong. And if I am asked to leave for that reason, I will understand. But I will not back down on this."

"Hmm," Master Yoda said. "Part of this process, we all have been," he pointed out, gesturing around the room. "Some say, we should get too, hmm?"

"I acknowledge that and thank you all for your help. But, Master Yoda, that is part of the reason why I am taking this to the Council at all. If I had my way, I wouldn't. But I do see the wisdom in your suggestion, so I will compromise."

The old master sighed. "If change your mind, I cannot, then very well. Think it is a good idea, I do not, but understand you, I do."

Anakin felt his shoulders relax. "Thank you, Master Yoda."

"Include history on the Sith with the files, we should, then," the Grandmaster finally said, a little thoughtful.

That… was a great idea.

"I can get that together," Master Xio put in.

"And plan out, we should, what say to the Council, you will," Master Yoda continued.

Anakin nodded gratefully. "I would appreciate that."

"This may take a while," Girth pointed out.

"Have nothing for the rest of the night, I do," Master Yoda pointed out.

"Nothing I can't cancel," Master Xio said.

"I have the night free as well," Girth confirmed with a nod, then turned his twitching nose to his patient.

"I only have training and sorting information in my future," Anakin said with a small smile. He felt far more relaxed than he had earlier.

"Very well. Now, where should we start?" Girth asked.

Anakin's smile widened. Despite the long night ahead, he had people who trusted him and whom he trusted near. It felt nice… safe.

And it felt good.

He could only hope it would last.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thanks to Khalthar and Quathis for their help with this!

Soooo last months my computer crashed. I lost a lot of stuff with it, fortunately had some backups online, but... not of this one for some reason. I... don't want that to happen again, so am taking precautions. That's why this is a month late. I'm also not a huge fan of the chapter as it is and wish I had more of the original back, but it is what it is and getting this up now is better than fussing over it for more weeks or months.

You have my apologies. Next month should be fine. I have started it and have it SAVED... *goes to save it RIGHT NOW just so I'm 100 percent sure*

I literally have four points left to hit before the end game. I counted. If I'm not done by the end of this year... well... no, I will be. I will MAKE it so... *grumbles under breath*

Thank you for reading.

Discord: https://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin sat back from his terminal and stretched.

They didn't have everything completely sorted, but they'd found the most incriminating evidence so far… and one of the most key pieces consisted of a holo-recording of Dooku testifying what he'd seen and done. When he said Palpatine would know who had given this information away, he wasn't kidding.

But they had everything they needed now. There was still a lot to go through, but if Anakin gave this to his contacts, it should be enough. It was such a load off of his shoulders, it almost made him giddy. He had to remind himself not to count the Krayt Dragons before they hatched, but with everyone they were giving this information to…

Palpatine would be ousted at the least.

He had to believe that.

(If not, plan B would be him assassinating the man, but they'd cross that bridge when they came to it.)

Reaching over, he withdrew the last data disk he'd been compiling, one of three. Then he glanced over to Master Yoda and nodded. The Grandmaster returned his nod, so Anakin hopped down and shut down his station. It would be his job to give the disks to the right people: Senator Mothma, Senator Organa and one of Padmé's friends from Before, Senator Mina Bontari of Onderon. It had surprised him to see her at the Senate building seeing as he remembered her being a Seperatist, and he didn't know her personally but he had remembered how Padmé had spoken of her. He'd vetted her himself, looking into her past and investigating every potential problem. Eventually, he had concluded that she would be an excellent candidate.

And that was it. They still had some plans to hammer out but they were *done* for the most part.

He had so much energy now that they were so close. The anticipation of the results of so much hard work from so many people, the idea that he'd almost reached his goal… it was a heady feeling. And

terrifying. Because Palpatine would not go down easily and they had to be ready for that.

Wanting to blow off some extra steam, he bid Master Yoda a good evening and then hurried down to the training salles. He wanted to get in a bit of a work out before third meal.

While going through his katas, he went through the next week's events in his mind. First, he would have one more meeting with Palpatine, and then the Gala where he would hand off the information, and then his talk with the Council. Well, that would be next week, but he would still have to plan and prepare himself for it. He wasn't entirely sure how ready he would be, but he was also tired of keeping everything to himself. Girth was right. He needed to tell the Council, if only so he could put it all behind him and just move on – stop keeping secrets and pretending to be something he wasn't.

He never had been good at that anyway.

The workout helped, and he left the salles feeling satisfied and in a good mood. Third meal came and went with some pleasant discussion with his physical age mates and then Anakin decided to go racing. Bleersh was thrilled to see him and he ended up having a fairly successful night, although he had enough energy to burn that he stayed a little longer than he probably should have.

Which was why he was so tired the next day. Not that he couldn't function. He'd gone through entire missions on less… Master Yoda still took one look at him when he showed up the next morning to finish going over plans and sent him right back to the crèche, although not without a mild scolding about how he needed to be mindful of his childish body.

Anakin felt a little abashed, but returned to his room without complaint and took the opportunity to rest some more. Turned out, though, that he was just not tired enough to calm his mind and fall asleep, but was too tired to want to get up and do anything. Which did not bode well for the rest of his day.

Still, it was so nice to not have some pressing matter urging him on. It had been… well, a very long time since that had last happened to him. So, instead of getting up to do something, he decided to meditate, opening himself to the Force with a familiar practice and letting it take him where it would.

He didn't know how long he had drifted before he heard a familiar

voice.

"Hello, Anakin."

The time traveler opened his eyes and found himself floating in a void in the exact same position as his physical body at the Temple, but in his older form. In front of him sat an old man, face wrinkled and craggy, but also timeless somehow. Two blue irises glowed in sunken eyes under no eyebrows. He had a long, white beard and wore a simple poncho with a high collar and gold inlay. Simple but elegant. He also wore a matching, conical hat and sat in a similar meditation pose to Anakin.

He knew who this was.

The Father. From Mortis. Well.

Anakin blinked at the likely insanely powerful being in front of him. "Oh. You're alive," was all he could manage to make his mouth move to say. He almost instantly regretted saying anything. He didn't know how powerful this being was but ticking him off didn't seem like the healthiest thing to do or the wisest of habits to get into (something he probably should have learned a lot earlier… he wondered if that had to do with his slave complex too…).

Fortunately for him, the Father chuckled, seemingly amused at his comment. Then he fixed Anakin with a knowing gaze and somehow, the time traveler knew that this being knew about *everything*. He shifted a little, feeling uncomfortable and exposed and not entirely sure what to do or think about that realization and the meeting.

Unfortunately, the Father seemed more than ready to wait, just sitting and watching Anakin patiently. So the time traveler finally cleared his throat.

"So… why are we meeting?"

The man, still amused, raised his (non-existent) eyebrows. "Why do you ask questions to which you already know the answer?"

Anakin frowned. He'd been avoiding thinking about Mortis – not difficult; he had practice as he hadn't wanted to think about the place since he'd initially left – for many reasons, and didn't like that it had suddenly come up just when everything with Palpatine was about to come to a head. He also hated feeling like a chastised child, which he definitely did now, and so he accidentally fell back on his habits when

addressing the Emperor.

"Why am I meeting you *now* instead of in a decade? And why like this?" he demanded in a hard voice.

The Father seemed to contemplate that for a bit. "I *can* reach out to you now because you have been to Mortis."

Ah, that explained how he knew about the time travel.

"Why not two years ago when I returned, then? I assume you want me to come and take over your duties, still, but you will receive the same answer today as you would have received then."

"Perhaps," the Father said with a conceding nod, "but were you ready to even speak to me then?"

Anakin opened his mouth to say something, but then paused as he thought about that. He wasn't happy about the question and the truth it exposed, but he did not want to lie here – not to this being, and not to himself.

"No," he finally conceded, looking away. "I was not stable enough then. I am unsure if I am stable enough now. Not with… the plans we are about to enact."

The Father chuckled again. "Ah, yes. My son threw quite the tantrum when he realized."

If Anakin had been in his body, his face would have paled significantly. "Will he tell Palpatine?"

The Father shook his head. "He cannot. Talented and skilled as Sidious is, and despite his own thoughts on the matter, he is not all-knowing and we can only influence the Force so much."

That… didn't make sense. "I thought you… *were* the Force."

The Father outright laughed at that. "Oh, no, my dear boy. We *represent* the Force, and in many ways we are *of* the Force – incarnations, if you will – and have a far closer connection than other sapient beings, but the Force does not originate from us. It will continue without us or with us, we just… regulate it to some extent, I suppose. When we are in balance, it is easier for the Force to remain in balance. Likewise, the more in balance the Force is, the easier it is for us to be."

He fell into silence for a moment, still looking amused.

"How much are you downplaying the truth to simplify the idea?" Anakin asked, deadpan.

The Father grinned (which was strange, he'd never seen the man *grin* before). "Quite a bit," he conceded.

Anakin sighed and shook his head.

The ancient being sobered a little. "Getting back to my initial reason for meeting you, I must say that I am impressed with how far you have healed. You have finally reached a point where you are well enough to contact sooner than I thought you would. Which is fortuitous."

The time traveler appreciated that, he did, but… that didn't change anything. He wondered how he should say that, and finally decided to simply state it. He'd never been good at subtle anyway.

"I… will not come and take over for you. I can not tie myself to one place. Not so long as Palpatine is alive."

The Father looked like he was about to speak, so Anakin hurried on.

"And even then… the idea of tying myself to one place for the rest of my life, no matter how long that life is…" he paused and shook his head. "I have had my freedom taken from me so often already. I cannot give it up like that." He met the Father's gaze steadily, gathering all of his conviction and determination.

The man's smile disappeared and he sighed. "I understand."

Anakin blinked. He had not been expecting that. "You… do?"

The Father nodded, smiling sadly. "I do, for now. Eventually, you will change your mind, but your exploits now have lengthened my time, so I can wait."

That took Anakin back. "Lengthened… your time?"

"Yes. You have initiated some changes in the Order – the most significant force for Light currently in the galaxy – that encourages balance. You have also gone a long way to stop the Sith from encroaching too far and taking too much, as they are wont to do. And while there will still be problems in the future and the balance is still

uneven, it is more manageable now. For that, you have my thanks."

"I… didn't do it for you," Anakin pointed out hesitantly, wondering where this was going if the Father didn't want to persuade him to come to Mortis.

The man nodded. "I know, but I am grateful nonetheless."

"Why have you contacted me, then?" Anakin asked carefully.

"Palpatine."

The time traveler winced, then glanced around. "Can… your son hear us right now?"

The Father shook his head. "There is too much light here for him to have any control or knowledge of our discussion."

Anakin looked around the void they were in. Swirls of light and dark reminiscent of a galaxy or solar system being born moved around him in calm patterns.

"I see," he said with a frown. "Then where is your daughter?"

"She cannot attend either as there is too much darkness."

Anakin paused and tentatively reached out. It took him a good several moments to realize that he could feel both the light and the dark. Instead of the normal mesh of both coming together he was used to, the different energies felt… *distinct*, as if they couldn't combine or nullify the other here.

"What?" he asked, confused.

The Father sighed, held up his hands and drew the Force to him in concentration. On one side, the area above his hand became dark. Negativity poured from it in radiating waves. Over the other, though, the space became light. Pure joy and love so concentrated it almost overwhelmed Anakin swirled outward from it.

The Father sat there, one eyebrow raised as if to say, 'see?' while Anakin tried to find something to say but couldn't. Finally, he managed to get out one word: "How?"

The being smirked a little. "Strange you would ask that when you have done this before yourself."

That took Anakin back. "When?" He could not remember a time when he had wielded the light and dark at the same time. He… didn't think it was possible, honestly.

The Father looked at amused. "In your past, when you first visited Mortis. You made both my son and daughter kneel before you simultaneously, thus passing my – or my other self's, I suppose – test."

The time traveler opened his mouth to protest, but found he couldn't. His memories of Mortis were… fuzzy at best, but he… he did remember that, but he thought it had been a fluke. He'd just been so desperate at the time to have the two of them stop fighting so Obi-wan and Ahsoka would be safe.

"Admittedly that was not to *this* extent," the man said, gesturing to each hand with his head before releasing whatever he'd been doing. The light and dark both vanished and a tenseness in Anakin's shoulders he hadn't been consciously aware of relaxed. "But it still happened.

"Do you remember what you did at the time?"

The time traveler… did, but vaguely as he'd been more focused on other things at the time. Could he do it again? Did he want to?

No. No, he didn't.

He shook his head. "Why does it matter? I will not touch the dark side again," he stated. "Another reason why I cannot take over for you."

The Father frowned, looking far more like the old man Anakin remembered. "I am not the only being in the universe who can duel wield both sides of the Force."

That… was indeed true. "Perhaps," Anakin conceded, "but even if I have done so before, it is not sustainable for me – a mere human, Chosen One or not."

"It is," the Father insisted. "And you can."

Anakin felt his frustration rising. "I *tried*."

Because he had. Right after he'd turned, he'd tried to use the Force like normal, tired to be both light and dark. It hadn't worked then, so why would it work now?

The Father looked frustrated. "Is the current Jedi Way the only way to approach the light?"

Anakin frowned. "Of course not."

"Then why would the Sith Way you know be the only way to approach the darkness?"

The former Sith had known that too. He'd seen what the Nightsisters could do – to some extent at least. So what was the Father getting at? Was he implying that the Jedi *and* Sith codes were inherently flawed? More so than even Anakin had realized? But still… valid? Anakin felt like he'd missed something.

"I see I have pushed you," the Father said quietly. "Forgive me. It has been… quite a long time since I was at your development level. I do know that improving mental health does not make one ready to face the truths of the universe. However, there is little time.

"You know there will be a confrontation?"

They were back to Palpatine again. Anakin winced at the reminder. "Yes."

The Father began to look concerned. "If you avoid the dark, you will lose."

In his body, Anakin's heart felt like it stopped. He shook his head vehemently. "I do not need the dark to win!"

The Father's face became stoic. "You do."

"*I don't*!"

"Then he will trigger your fall a second time."

Anakin's jaw snapped closed and his eyes widened.

"You know the truth of my words."

He… did. It had been one of his greatest fears and one of the reasons he did not want to face Palpatine.

He clenched his jaw – or whatever the spiritual equivalent was – and looked away. "Then what can I do?" he asked quietly. The idea of wielding the darkness again… it had almost sucked him in so many times. He *couldn't*… "The dark…" he said, but his voice faded off.

The Father tipped his head to one side and spoke once more, his voice gentle. "How did you feel?"

Anakin blinked. "What?"

"When you stopped both of my children. How did you feel?"

Hadn't they left this behind?

"What does—" he started, but the Father cut him off.

"Humor me?"

Anakin huffed in frustration, but then took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and forced himself to revisit those unpleasant memories. "I was… frustrated. Angry and scared," he said, remembering his desperation to save his father figure and pseudo-sister.

"Traits of the darkness," the Father pointed out.

Anakin frowned and opened his eyes. "But I hadn't fallen yet. I was not… wielding through those, but *despite* them…" he said. But something about that wasn't entirely right… what was he missing?!

"Why?" the Father asked.

"Why?" Anakin repeated, not sure what the man was asking.

"Why were you even using the Force at the time?" the Father prompted.

The time traveler blinked. "I was worried."

"For whom?"

"For Obi-wan and Ahsoka," he said.

"Is that all?"

Anakin shot an annoyed glare at the man, who just returned the gaze patiently. "That was a long time ago," he pointed out.

"But you still had other worries. What were they?"

Where was this going? Anakin squashed his frustration and tried to answer sincerely. "For the galaxy outside of Mortis that was still at war, for the commitments I had – the Jedi and the Clones and the

planets at war, for… my wife."

"Why were you were worried?"

If he hadn't been used to doing something like this with Girth for the past two years, he may not have been able to say it – or even recognize it – but because he had, he *finally* got where the Father was going.

"Because I loved them…" he said. Or, well, "because I *cared*. And that was just as important – more important – to me as my frustration and anger." One hadn't outshone the other. Just like with Luke. In that moment, in that one desperate moment, he'd been able to touch both sides of the Force because he'd been able to feel both positive and negative emotions equally.

It was all about balance.

"I used the Force *through* my emotions – the ones I concentrated on." A dark technique with light emotions.

The Father smiled warmly. "Yes."

But he'd been doing that for over a year now, in this timeline, hoping to transition back to normal Jedi meditation soon. Was it really that simple? (Was it simple?)

"I… don't understand," he finally said, still getting that sense of missing something that he utterly despised.

The Father seemed to think about that for a moment before he asked, "What is the Sith Code? Repeat it, please."

Anakin frowned, but humored the man. "*Peace is a lie. There is only Passion. Through Passion, I gain Strength. Through Strength, I gain Power. Through Power, I gain Victory. Through Victory my chains are Broken. The Force shall free me.*" He paused once finished, but the Father said nothing, so Anakin shook his head. "But Peace *isn't* a lie. Perhaps it can't always last, but it *does* exist. The whole code is built upon that single, false foundation."

The Father raised an eyebrow wryly. "When you touch the darkness, is peace a lie?"

"No," Anakin said slowly.

"Truly?" the older being asked. "Can you feel peace when you touch the darkness?"

"Of course not."

"So is peace a lie?"

Instead of answering that, Anakin thought about it for several seconds. He felt like he was right on the verge of grasping what the Father wanted him to understand.

"So," he started slowly, "you mean that it isn't peace in general or as an absolute that the code is referring to?" The Father nodded, more from encouragement for him to keep going than anything else, though, from what Anakin could sense. "When channeling the darkness, peace *is* a lie. I cannot ever find peace while touching the darkness."

The older being smiled. "You are beginning to understand."

Anakin didn't answer, instead mulling that over in his mind again and again… and then it clicked.

"It's a warning," he said, eyes widening. "It was never meant to be read like the Jedi Mantra at all – like a *guide*!"

The Father chuckled. "Why should it be read the same? The Sith hate the Jedi and everything they stood for. The wiser ones could see past that though. They influenced this."

Anakin continued to go over the code in this new light. "There is only passion in the darkness," he went on, but something didn't quite add up. He looked up. "But… to wield the darkness, must you avoid it all? Strength? Power? *Victory*?" He paused. "Freedom?"

The Father looked stony but felt… empathetic? Something like that. "What is set free when one channels the darkness?"

The time traveler frowned. "The darkness itself. Everything negative."

The older being nodded but said nothing as Anakin continued to work through that.

Peace is a lie when channeling the darkness. There is only Passion when channeling the darkness. Through passion, the *darkness* gains strength, and power and victory… the Force sets the *darkness* free.

Which meant…

"To wield the darkness, you have to approach it as a Jedi would approach the light… through self-control and discipline." He wasn't exactly sure *how* that was possible as he'd only been able to touch the darkness through negativity… but then, that would be a testament to ones self control when wielding the darkness, in that case.

The Father smiled again, looking supremely proud. "If any one of those 'goals' listed in the Sith Code becomes your priority while channeling darkness, your self control will be set free and become impossible to maintain for any normal person. When one only seeks strength, power, victory and yes, even freedom above all else, you have gone too far and have lost your balance."

Balance…

"The darkness *requires* balance," Anakin said, looking down for a moment in thought, and then back up. "The light is already stable. I…" and suddenly it all fell into place. Oh. *Oh*. "I… was never meant to balance the whole Force… was I." He didn't say it as a question.

The Father tipped his head to one side and then the other, as if weighing something in his mind. "Yes, and no. The philosophies of the dark have the most inherent problems in them, currently, but it is true that the light lends itself to stability – hence the reason why so many Jedi think the balancing of the Force is to eliminate the Sith. Even if the philosophies in general that approach wielding the light are in and of themselves just as problematic in their own way."

Anakin felt as if an entire new world had opened up to him suddenly and he couldn't seem to get enough, so he asked, "Why are they problematic?" Not that he didn't have his own ideas, but he was curious as to what the Father would say."

The man shrugged and smiled softly. "If the way to approach the dark is through balance and self control – if one does not want to lose themselves to the darkness in any case, then…" he faded off expectantly.

"Channeling the Force through light emotions is better?" Anakin concluded.

The Father tipped his head back and forth again, such slight movements but it conveyed so much. "Not necessarily *better*, per se, but it can certainly help Force users to build an immunity to the

influence of the darkness. When one is used to truly feeling and still controlling their own emotions, it is more difficult to fall so completely to them. The Jedi code does not forbid this, currently, but many have interpreted it to a point where it is *easier* to simply not feel emotions than it is to exercise self control."

Anakin rested his chin in his hand, unaware of how much like Obi-wan he looked at that moment. "So you mean to say that the reason why Jedi cannot come back from the dark is because their very philosophies leave them vulnerable once they touch the darkness?"

The older being nodded. "Much like a virus in a population that has no immunity to it."

Anakin groaned. It made so much sense! "Oh, Force."

"And that is why I have come to you, Anakin," the Father said, voice serious. "I am the personification – the representative – of balance. Currently, neither side is balanced and it is creating chaos. The Force is not like a see-saw, weighing back and forth like an equation. It is so much *more* than that. I am siding against my son because of how much chaos and unbalance the darkness winning will begin. It will take centuries – millennia – to truly overcome it.

"Thus I have to tell you: if you fight Palpatine with only the light as your ally – something he has worked hard to understand and counter as best he can his entire life – *you will lose*. If you fight Palpatine on his level – with darkness – you *may* win the battle, but you will still, ultimately, lose.

"You are the *Chosen One*, Anakin. No matter how you came into being, that is not something you can simply change. One way or another, your actions will bring balance, whether through destruction – like last time – or through construction, which is a far more difficult path in many ways."

He finished his little speech and the two of them fell into silence amidst the eddies of light and dark – of despair and hope, of hate and love…

"So…" he finally said slowly, "I have a couple of weeks – months at most – to master a completely new technique and self discipline and stop Sidious from destroying the galaxy as we know it… or potentially join him once again."

The Father smiled a little. "Essentially."

Anakin wanted to sigh or groan or just lay down under the weight of it all, and for once, he felt his physical age of almost twelve-years-old. "No pressure," he grumbled. It was never anything Vader would say – would be allowed to say – but that actually gave him a little comfort.

Vader had been a lie built on lies anyway.

To Anakin's surprise, the Father chuckled again. "Anakin, you and I both know that you work best under pressure."

Fair, but…

"I'm so tired," he said softly, shaking his head slightly.

The Father reached out slowly, leaning forward so he could put a hand on Anakin's shoulder – he looked too far away for that, but it still worked somehow. Perhaps because this wasn't the physical world?

"I am sorry this burden was laid on your shoulders, child," he said quietly. "It is a heavy burden. And I know you feel like you have broken under it's pressure more than once."

"I have," Anakin muttered.

"But you have built yourself back *stronger*. You can handle this, my boy, for just a little longer. Then, perhaps, you should try something new – something you can be utterly terrible at without severe consequences. Take a break and learn to relax. You deserve it."

He didn't feel like he did… but he did sense the Father was being sincere.

So he nodded. "I'll try."

The Father smiled. "Good. That is all I can ask. Now, perhaps you should go and actually sleep instead of meditating your afternoon away."

Anakin returned the smile, gave a nod, and closed his eyes, searching for a connection to his body before following it back.

He opened his eyes to the small crèche quarters he'd come to be so familiar with, and looked around. It didn't look any different than before he'd meditated. It didn't feel different… and yet, somehow, it *did* at the same time. He didn't fully understand how that was possible

and wasn't entirely sure what to make of that. The Father had given him so much to think about that it almost made his head hurt. How could everything be the same but… not?

He blamed his tired state of mind when it took him several seconds to realize how it wasn't everything *else* that had changed… just *him*.

Anakin shook his head as he tried to understand all of it – or even *some* of it – but especially in his current state, he found that difficult. Which was ridiculous. He'd worked through worse before. Admittedly, usually as an adult, but a couple of times as a child too. Then again, working through sleep-deprivation as a child taking classes he could pass in his sleep and pondering existential questions that could leave the weight of the entire galaxy on his shoulders were in no way the same.

He still tried, his mind whirling with half-finished thoughts and new ideas but unable to connect them how he wanted – needed – to. Eventually he had to give it up as a bad job or begin drawing on the Force, which would undermine the reason he'd come back to his room at all. He'd simply have to think on it later.

So he forced himself to looked around intently. He sensed no danger, so after a few minutes, he laid down and managed to fall asleep not long after.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thank you to Khalthar and Quathis for their help on this. I honestly went back and forth for a while because I wasn't sure exactly WHERE this would fit as we make our way to the final peak of the story. I hope no one is seriously disappointed. I've had the end of it mostly figured out for a while (the major parts imo) and while a couple of people have guessed it, most haven't. I hope that means I'm doing my job as a writer right. I even had someone I began talking to recently figure it out simply because of how I spoke to him and my general goal/motivation. LOL That was... well, interesting, I suppose. Didn't realize I put THAT much of myself into these stories, but it also makes sense.

Anyway, thank you for reading!

Discord: https://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Coruscant truly was a feat of sapient ingenuity; magnificent, pristine and state-of-the-art. It was also, simultaneously, the epitome of a true slum, showing the utter dregs of society; terrible, grimy and ancient. Anakin had seen the city world from multiple different angles many times before, and this route showed him nothing new, yet he found himself appreciating it more than usual. He'd taken the airbus from the Jedi Temple to the Senate Building hundreds if not thousands of times before – but rarely took the time to truly observe the structures surrounding it. He'd taken it for granted… much like he had the Force and his connection to it, he supposed.

He sighed as he watched the scene out of the window of the transport, unable to really keep his mind from wandering and not trying very hard to reign his train of thought in. Despite his upcoming time block of Ambassadorial duty, he found himself only mildly concerned instead of in his usual brace-for-disaster state. He chalked a lot of that up to the mind-healing session he'd had with Master Xio the night before, discussing the completely new view on the Force and both the Jedi and Sith codes, once he'd explained the Father and his vision of course. That had already thrown the older master for a loop, but when he'd spoken about how, if viewed as a warning, the Sith Code took on a completely new meaning, the older master had just stared at him as if he'd grown a second head. After a couple of seconds, though, she'd pulled herself out of her shock and they'd had an extremely interesting discussion on the sides of the Force and how different philosophies encouraged different mind-sets in the societies that had grown around them.

Unfortunately, they hadn't spoken much about Palpatine and Anakin's upcoming visit, but the discussion had led him to thinking of his former master in a different light. Not necessarily better, but definitely different. The dark liked to control those who touched it – especially those who had been raised with Jedi philosophies. Yet Palpatine wielded the dark so effortlessly. He felt, looked and acted like he owned the Force – like he *was* the dark side. It was a recurring theme with him as that's how he viewed his relation to the Senate as well. (Did his narcissism have no bounds?)

He'd always been so confident that Anakin had never really asked: Was Palpatine as free as he presented? To answer that, he supposed he needed to define freedom, so he pulled out his comm and opened the holoweb app. He was unsurprised to come up with many definitions from all over the galaxy, but it was a little overwhelming.

The top definitions included: *The absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action; liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another: independence; the quality or state of being exempt or released usually from something onerous – freedom from care; unrestricted use gave him the freedom of their home; ease, facility spoke the language with freedom; the quality of being frank, open, or outspoken answered with freedom; improper familiarity; boldness of conception or execution; a political right.**

And that was just the tip of the iceberg. This… would be more complicated than he'd thought. Still, as he sat there on the airbus on his way to the Senate, he went through each and every one of them, applying the different definitions to the code. His results were… inconclusive, much to his annoyance and frustration. Some of the definitions applied to Palpatine, some of them didn't, and some of them hadn't made any sense in the context of the code. The Force shall give me ease and facilitate my ability to speak language unrestrained? He'd actually snorted outright at that one.

He was reminded yet again why this was Padme's and Obi-wan's strength, not his.

And that was before he realized that Palpatine's definition of freedom likely differed from Anakin's, and probably changed on a regular basis to suit his goals and narrative.

Did Palpatine strive for anything that wasn't power? He highly suspected that 'power' and 'freedom' were one and the same in the man's mind, so much as he applied the term to himself in any case.

He was still contemplating as he absently made his way through the Senate building, only really shooing the train of thought away as he exited the last lift. The new angle was interesting and thought-provoking, but ultimately changed nothing. In the end, Palpatine still had to be deposed and arrested if not destroyed (and Anakin would be lying if he said he didn't prefer the latter), for the sake of the galaxy. That meant Anakin had to focus on the here and now; on surviving the next couple of hours in close proximity to Palpatine.

"I'm a recently freed slave from Tatooine whose master used to be manipulative and emotionally… abusive," he paused for a moment, realizing that as much as he hated to admit it, the man had been abusive. And Anakin had been abused… well, Anakin had been groomed and Vader had been abused (was there really any difference?). That… was not easy to realize or admit even to himself. It hurt to realize how much he'd been taken advantage of, and what he'd been unable to stop, but both of his therapists (and many of the rest of those in the know) had verbally beaten it into his head again and again that that had not been his fault or anything he should blame himself for. Girth had helped him see, a couple of months back, that he had blamed himself in a bid to try and regain some control over the situation – that not having control… concerned him.

But how much of the world around him could he control? How much *should* he control? How many people had he hurt or killed trying to control his situation?

It had taken him a couple of sessions to begin to realize that in the end, he could only control himself, and that was what he had to do here.

"I don't trust older men. Around them, I tend to be withdrawn and guarded. I am just settling into the Jedi Order and Coruscant. This is all overwhelming." And of those, only the last had been truly incorrect. Coruscant and the Senate wasn't overwhelming in the slightest in and of themselves. Although with everything else going on…

Once again, he likely wouldn't be acting much.

He walked into the waiting room for the Chancellor's office and up to the secretary there as calmly as he could.

"Anakin," she said with a smile. "I'm glad you're here. He's actually asked for you immediately."

The state of calm he'd managed to achieve didn't shatter, but that was only out of sheer will, and some of it must have shown on his face because the woman hurried to reassure him.

"You've done nothing wrong, I promise! He just had a problem come up with his current meeting and thinks you can help him prove a point."

That… didn't help much. "Prove a point?" Anakin asked, hoping for

more clarity.

"I think it will become apparent once you get in there," she said warmly. "Head on back. I think you'll like this. Few people would get such a chance!"

Anakin didn't believe that for a second, even if the secretary might.

He glanced at the door to the Chancellor's office once before steeling himself, nodding at the smiling woman and walking back with his head held high.

He made sure he didn't hesitate when pressing the alert button, and waited patiently (or, he hoped he looked patient) for the Chancellor to open said door. After just a few seconds, it whooshed open and Anakin faced the unfortunately familiar office. If it didn't have so many bad memories associated with it, he may have actually appreciated the nostalgia.

"Ah, Anakin," Palpatine said as he stood. "Just in time!"

The initiate felt himself straightening, keeping his attention on Palpatine, only allowing his focus to drift with the Force, taking everyone in the room in. With as uptight as he felt right now, he didn't dare fight old habits – keep his focus on the Emper… Chancellor, and only acknowledge everyone else once he received permission. That didn't mean he wouldn't be prepared. He could sense three other people there, one of them felt familiar but he couldn't place the signature.

The Chancellor gestured to the others in the room, and Anakin allowed himself to finally turn his attention to them. It took considerable effort to not show his distaste. He'd never been a fan of the being before him.

"This is Senator Orn Free Taa of Ryloth, his aid Ms. Pampy, and his current secretary, Lan Supa." The former, of course, towered above everyone, his rather wide girth not as… impressive as Anakin remembered it being in the future, but if he recalled correctly, the twi-lek was a relatively new senator, not even on Coruscant a decade yet. He didn't remember either of the other two and could only guess that they would be replaced, fired or 'disappeared' before the Clone Wars began, when in the original time, Anakin would have been around enough to recognize their Force signatures.

Anakin bowed respectfully as Palpatine introduced him (much to his

chagrin).

"This is Anakin Skywalker, a Jedi initiate who has recently become my young Ambassador."

"I see," the large Senator said, looking Anakin up and down before seemingly dismissing him and turning to face the Sith in disguise. "And why did you want him in this discussion?"

"Since we are discussing the ongoing trade of your people, and he was recently freed from slavery himself, I thought he could provide some first-hand insight."

The time traveler felt himself stiffen even further. The idea of Palpatine talking about Anakin's past so freely – in front of, for all he knew, strangers nonetheless – did *not* sit well with him. The twi-lek senator also didn't seem happy with the new variable… strange because Anakin remembered him being a staunch supporter of Palpatine's, throughout both the end of the Republic and the Empire. For the Chancellor to call him out like this, even in private…

There was something more to this… and Anakin had a sinking suspicion that it had to do with him and his slip-up last week, although he couldn't put together exactly why. He did hate how he had to tamp down his panic and anger. It was an old but familiar anger as Palpatine had done more or less the same thing multiple times as the Emperor, purposefully dragging Vader's insecurities into the light and parading them for the entire Imperial Senate to see, as a simple joke or passing remark to 'help him', of course. They'd always been such cruel passing remarks…

"With all due respect, Chancellor," the large twi-lek said, more than a little outrage in his tone, "the boy's experiences and my people's experiences are very likely completely different." Well, he wasn't *wrong*, per se, but that didn't mean his view should be completely dismissed. Especially by one such as this, who was likely dismissing Anakin simply because he didn't want to see the truth. He, himself, had been tied to his own people's trafficking several times, although nothing had come of the allegations, of course.

"I believe that remains to be seen," the Chancellor said, a little coolly. His voice warmed significantly when he turned to Anakin. "My boy, I am sorry to spring this on you so suddenly," a lie, "but did you happen to know any twi-lek slaves while in your unfortunate circumstances?"

Anakin glanced between Palpatine and Taa for a couple of seconds

before focusing back on the Chancellor. "Yes."

"And their conditions?"

Anakin frowned but still answered truthfully, as Palpatine would expect. He had to remember that – keep giving Palpatine what he's calculated.

"On average, typical conditions for sex slaves on Tatooine."

Taa finally turned his disdainful expression onto Anakin. "Typical statement from ignorance, assuming all twi-leks are sex slaves." Anakin felt himself bristle. As if *that* made it better? Looking down on Anakin's experience simply because he'd made an easy, generalized statement.

"No," he returned, voice rock-solid, "but over 90% of biologically female twi-leks and 80% of male twi-leks *are*." A pulse in the Force came from the female twi-lek, a blue-skinned woman dressed in fancy robes. She didn't look up at Anakin and he suddenly had a very bad feeling regarding her. The male secretary – a rosy-skinned twi-lek dressed mostly in black with pops of color here and there, watched Anakin with curiosity.

"You could not possibly know that," Taa shot back.

The time traveler couldn't help his eyes narrow as he reached back and took out his comm, opening the same app he'd accessed before to look up the definition of freedom. Within seconds, he had the information he'd looked up multiple times before – he knew exactly where to find it. "According to *multiple* credible sources, the range goes between 90% flat and 98% for females, depending on which source you go to. The other 'duties' they have vary between dancing – very common – masseuse and other personal hygiene categories, nannies and child raring, personal finance, business finance, bodyguard and just standing, sitting or laying around as *ornaments*." He glanced at the woman again when he sensed another emotional flinch.

"Such claims! Outrageous!" Taa exclaimed.

"You claim the University of Coruscant – both the First and Fifth districts – are outrageous?"

"How could they have gotten their information?" Taa shot back. "Going into such places, they would have had to pose as slavers

themselves."

"Some got their information that way," Anakin conceded. "Some simply interviewed freed slaves or even current slaves under various other circumstances. But the Slavery and Sapient Trafficking department of their security force on Corellia, CorSec, along with the University of Coronet, has similar statistics. Universities and research facilities from Balosar, Metellos, Plexis, Tepasi, Dowut *all say the same thing*.

"And even if they didn't, why does that matter?" Anakin asked the spluttering Senator. "They're still *slaves*! They've still had *their very rights* stripped of them for another's comfort, pleasure or amusement!" He paused.

"What is this 'meeting' even about?" he asked, turning back to Palpatine, and upon seeing the man's 'concerned' face (with that slightly amused smile that meant he was enjoying something), he managed to get himself back under control. He hadn't thought that he'd lose his composure like that for the old wound of slavery.

"Sir," he finally said, trying to sound as meek as possible.

"We are discussing the resources the Republic has set aside for the recovery of slaves – specifically from Ryloth, currently," the Chancellor responded with that false concern of his – false only because Anakin knew, not because he could actually *tell*. "I asked the Senator here if he would like to join a coalition of planets who are coming together to do something about their Sapient Trafficking problems. I simply thought you could offer some insight. I must admit, I didn't think you'd be so… *passionate* about the subject."

Anakin's gut clenched. The way Palpatine had emphasized the word 'passionate'…

Through Passion I gain Strength…

"Most unusual for a Jedi," the Sith in hiding went on. "It is very refreshing to see, I must say."

And, for just a moment, he wore an expression that was pure Sidious, no hint of the mask of Palpatine he hid behind. Then it was gone and the concerned Chancellor was back.

He let me see that, Anakin realized. *Because he knows…* What exactly Palpatine knew, Anakin could only begin to guess at, but he'd caught

the slip and come to conclusions about Anakin and his relation to the Sith.

For a moment that lasted an eternity, Anakin contemplated reaching for his comm and sending the 'Red' code to Yoda, Girth, Xio and probably Siri. But after a moment, he dismissed it (for now, he was keeping the panic at bay, if only barely) and looked from the Chancellor to Taa again.

"It is something I am working on," he said, then nodded respectfully to the twi-lek, no matter how much it galled him to do so. "I did not mean to get so heated."

"Yes, well, perhaps you should remember that in the future," Taa responded haughtily. Then he turned to the Chancellor.

"We will not join this coalition! We can handle our own trafficking problems. We can always use more *funds*, but our system works the best for us as it is." The twi-lek was either extremely naive or lying through his teeth… almost certainly the latter.

"Of course," Palpatine replied, all false sympathy and calmness. "I simply thought you would want to do so, what with the recent bounties on your life. I wouldn't want you to be in danger right here in the Senate, of course, especially when I realized that the bounty was from a group from your home planet."

Taa looked a little taken aback at that. Had he not heard of the bounty? Or had he known but not expected Palpatine to bring it up? He recovered quickly, though, waving his hand nonchalantly. "That is from a faction group. All planets have one – including your own, from what I understand."

"Indeed," Palpatine said, "but I am allowed to show concern over a friend and supporter, am I not? Were such a thing to happen, I would do everything I could to bring your murderer before me to receive their just reward." For a second, Anakin's eyes met Palpatine's, and he looked pointedly at the Senator for just a moment… wait, was he suggesting…?

"And since I have heard you complain about the situation before," the Chancellor continued, "and heard of this new sub coalition, I simply thought it an opportunity for you to show how much you truly are working for your home and planet. But if they already know that, I suppose it is a useless gesture."

Every word seemed to calm Taa down, but Anakin was positive he hadn't misunderstood the meaning behind that glance and those words. Palpatine was offering him something – no, he was offering to let a slave kill a master. Anakin realized that he could kill Taa here and now, or later in the Senate, and Palpatine wouldn't even bat an eye. He was offering to cover it up…

And it bothered Anakin that he was tempted. Taa had always been corrupt at best, an outright criminal *himself* at worst, and while that tended to apply to several Senators, this one took joy in bringing his 'personal enterprises' to the next level. He was a disgusting piece of sapient garbage… and killing him would do so much good for the future.

But then he would tip his cards in front of Palpatine and he couldn't do that. He hated that ultimately, that was what stopped him.

"Yes, indeed it would be useless," Taa said, finally relaxing fully. Anakin could get him so easily right now… he shook that thought aside and looked away. "Is that the only reason you wished to see me today, Chancellor? Because I do have some proposals for the allotment allowed to Ryloth that I would like to run by you."

Anakin felt his anger spike and he turned a glare back on the Senator. Billions of his own people in chains, and all he wanted to think about was how he could skim more money – probably illegally – off of the Republic's (and Ryloth's) funds? The Senator wasn't even paying attention to him… but his aide was. She met his eyes, face stony, and he certainly sensed her well wishes and appreciation. He got the sense she'd never been a slave herself… but it was obvious to him that she knew someone who had been.

He felt himself soften ever so slightly and nodded back.

"That is an interesting proposal, and certainly something I can look into," Palpatine said, drawing Anakin's attention again. "If you can get a formal proposal to me before the next meeting, I can put you on the docket and you may propose that similar funds may be used in such ways in multiple systems."

Wait, that was his 'wrapping up' voice…

And Anakin did *not* want to be alone with him.

It was time to send the call… which code should he use? He ran through them in his mind. White for non-issue, blue for a couple of

minutes out of Palpatine's office, yellow for the day away and red for forever.

(He was so tempted to send the red, but then his mind-healers may not let him go to the gala, and he had to… except now someone would need to distract Palpatine or he might figure out who had the information and get ahead of it, even if he only just suspected and… and Anakin would really have to think on that later, when he wasn't on the verge of being alone in an office with his former master who knew he was at least connected to the Sith.)

While the Senator and his entourage stood, and Palpatine copied the gesture, Anakin sent a quick message with the word 'yellow' in the title and a comment talking about some robes he supposedly saw on the way up to the Chancellor's office.

Anakin stood at ease while the party made their slow goodbyes. Not slow enough…

Master Xio, he thought. *Master Yoda… please hurry*. Otherwise all of their hard work may be for nothing. He wasn't sure who would walk out of here alive (and fallen…) if he was left alone with the man currently. He was glad he'd thought to bring his lightsaber at least, but… well, Palpatine was younger and theoretically not as good at fighting… would Anakin stand a chance?

When the Father had told him he'd have very little time to figure out a new way of balance to take on Palpatine he hadn't realized it would come this soon…

And then a loud call came from his comm, with a sound he hadn't heard since the war. It meant an emergency.

He didn't jump. He didn't.

He did almost drop the comm unit before he managed to open the text that had been sent.

It stated that all Jedi not currently undercover on Coruscant must return to the temple immediately for their own safety due to threats received.

Anakin just stared at the holo message for several seconds. They'd done it… they'd actually managed to come up with a viable reason for him to return and implement it in minutes. He had to fight to keep the relief off of his face – and out of the Force.

"What is it, initiate?" Palpatine asked from the doorway looking rather annoyed. Orn Free Taa just looked curious.

"Someone has threatened the life of a Jedi… as a terrorist attack. We don't know which one."

"Who would do such a thing?" Taa asked, although he didn't sound concerned in the slightest.

"Who indeed?" Palpatine asked with a deadpan look only Anakin could see. He refused to allow himself to gulp. Or smirk… that would be bad, no matter how tempting.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I need to go, now."

"Surely the Senate will be more than safe enough," Palpatine countered.

"I don't think the temple would want to put the Chancellor at risk," Anakin returned as calmly as he could. "The message didn't stipulate Initiates and Padawans only and if this terrorist is able to pose a credible threat to a Knight or even a Master, then your security forces will likely be no match for them."

"Quite right," Taa said before Palpatine could say anything. For just a moment, Anakin thought the Chancellor might murder the twi-lek where he stood, he looked so angry. Then his face smoothed out and he nodded magnanimously.

"Very well. Do you need an escort?" the Sith-in-disguise asked.

"No, I will be meeting the other Ambassadors in a… specified area," Anakin said after glancing down at the holo message again. It didn't actually say that, but he needed to get out… now, and without any strings attached.

"Then perhaps I can escort you, so far as I can on the way to my own offices," Taa suggested. Anakin wanted to roll his eyes. Taa's offices were on the other side of the building. The building itself could be a small city on most mid-rim planets. He wasn't really offering any sort of protection. Likely, he was just trying to get him away from the Chancellor so only Anakin would be a target.

Still, that was as good of an excuse as any. "I thank you for your offer and will gladly accept," Anakin said with a slight bow.

"I do hope you can come to the gala at the end of the week," Palpatine said, the concern back in his voice.

"I do too," Anakin replied, and at least that wasn't a lie.

"Come. We should hurry," Taa said.

"Of course," Anakin said as he hurried past Palpatine and thankfully out of the office. He did make sure to turn and bow respectfully. "Again, my apologies, sir."

"Think nothing of it! I would prefer you safe in the temple than here working under such conditions, of course!"

Such a liar. Such a *good* liar.

"Good day, sir!" Anakin said, then followed Orn Free Taa and his entourage out of the waiting room.

Taa immediately fell into conversation with his aid, speaking of their 'date' that evening and how grand the Balucian Opera was, what she should wear, etc. Normally, Anakin would have rolled his eyes, but after everything that had just happened with Palpatine, he could only look away, pushing the thoughts of killing this being out of his head. He could, he knew. The darkness whispered to him and… even after two years, he still fell back like this? No matter what anyone said, shouldn't he be over this mind-set?!

"So, you were a slave?" a tenor voice far nearer than Taa's drew Anakin's attention to the pink-skinned twi-lek… a Sal Lupa?

"Forgive my bluntness," the man said, smiling. Despite his sharp teeth, Anakin could tell he'd meant it to be friendly. "Lan Supa," he said, holding out his hand.

Ah, yes. That was it. "Anakin Skywalker," he said cautiously, taking the twi-lek's hand. "And yes, I was born a slave."

The man tipped his head to the side, causing the lekku draped around his shoulders to shift. "And you remember it? It was my understanding that Jedi could only be taken into the temple at a young age."

"I… was a bit of an exception," Anakin replied, hoping his discomfort didn't show. Times like this he really missed his mask.

"I see," the man said, looking thoughtful.

Then he leaned down and whispered to Anakin in a language he hadn't heard in years. "*Death to the masters*." He'd said that in slave creole, a very basic version of it and highly accented to what Anakin had known but…

"*Long lives to the worthy*," the initiate said the next phrase.

"*Freedom to the children,*" they said together. Anakin felt himself relaxing a little. Then he glanced at Taa, who didn't seem to be paying attention to them at all.

"You're here for him, aren't you," Anakin asked quietly, then switched to slave creole. *"You're a spy*." He'd forgotten a lot of the language after not using it for so long, but he remembered enough.

"*Death to the masters*," Supa repeated in a very low voice. "And yes, I am."

"*Do you… work on the trail?*" the time-traveler said, still glancing at Taa every few seconds. Anyone who knew that language would know what trail they spoke of. Anakin, himself, had never been part of the freedom trail, but every slave knew of it.

He'd helped to track several 'trails' down as Vader. Many of them had started to take Jedi and Force sensitives after the fall of the Republic.

He didn't want to think of how many slaves he'd doomed either to a painful death or a return to slavery.

Yet another evil act on the very long list of monstrous deeds he had committed in his pain and pride.

"I do," the twi-lek answered in basic.

"Then," Anakin started, thrilled to have met someone here, in the Senate, but Taa cut in.

"And here we are! Good luck to you, Initiate!" he said hurriedly, pointing to the lift that would take Anakin down as he turned to walk down a hall that would lead him to an indoor transport that would take him to the other side of the building. He didn't even look back.

The initiate scowled after him.

"Don't worry," Supa said, reaching out for Anakin's hand. The time-traveler's scowl melted as he shook the offered appendage. Then his

eyes widened in surprise as he felt the man slip him a piece of flimsy.

"It was good to meet you, Initiate Skywalker. If you, or any Jedi at the Temple, have any questions, you may contact me and I will answer them."

Anakin nodded and then looked down at the card in his hand. It simply had Lan Supa's name, office and comm code, likely a personal comm code.

This…

Anakin wasn't entirely sure what to make of it. Taking a deep breath, he put the card in his pocket and hurried towards the lift. He had to let everyone know what he'd learned about Sidious… and also Lan Supa.

And maybe go racing tonight because he needed something to soothe his frazzled nerves.

Chapter End Notes

*Multiple dictionaries

AN: Thank you to Quathis, Hidden50 and Khalthar for their helping with this!

Sorry this is so late. Family reunion and day-long drives to multiple states... But yeah.

Thank you for reading. I do appreciate it. :)

Discord: https://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin bit his lip as the transport specially sent to take all of the Young Jedi Ambassadors back to the Temple began to slow on approach. He was already planning the route he would take to the healer's wing – one of the back ways that would have less traffic. He needed to talk to someone, preferably one of his mind healers or Master Yoda, about everything that had happened and they needed to rethink the plans for the Gala. Palpatine would be watching him, so he couldn't give away the data disks to the Senators. Master Yoda or one of the other visiting Masters would have to do the drop-offs… except they'd likely be watched too and he didn't like them taking that chance either. Which meant they'd have to change their plans altogether and bring someone else in to drop off the information – something he'd been wanting to avoid because he couldn't think of anyone who wouldn't raise at least a little red flag to Palpatine. They couldn't take that chance. If Sidious knew or could track the information back before it got out… Anakin did *not* want more lives on his conscience and—

The airbus *finally* pulled to a stop, drawing him out of his (all too desperate) thoughts. He quickly stood, as did all the others – none of which he knew at this point, apparently Tru and Darra had their Ambassadorial time later, and the children began to file off. Only a couple of seconds of waiting and Anakin had to stop himself from jumping out of the side and rushing up the steps.

His comm unit buzzed and he took it out, glancing past the text he'd gotten from Master Yoda saying that he had to manage the 'threat' and thus wouldn't be able to meet Anakin for a while. The next text, the one that had just come in, actually came from Master Xio. He quickly opened it and frowned. She was in an emergency session with a Padawan who had recently lost their master.

He still hadn't gotten anything from Healer Girth… which was unusual for him. He couldn't be too busy as he was there at the Temple specifically for Anakin.

He didn't bite his lip, or tap his foot… or anything else except squeeze his stress ball. He weighed the pros and cons of calling Siri again and

only to realize, yet again, that it wouldn't be a good idea. And the thought of talking to Obi-wan about it just…

Not yet. Maybe some time in the future, when they'd addressed more of their baggage but right now the idea stressed him out more than it gave him relief.

Something about this all seemed familiar in an *extremely* uncomfortable way, but he brushed it aside and entered in the comm code for Healer Girth as he exited the airbus. The Jedi who had accompanied them asked them all to stay together as he led them up the steps and into the Temple.

"Hello? This is Healer Girth's comm."

That… wasn't Healer Girth.

"This is Initiate Anakin Skywalker… his patient."

"Oh, I am so sorry, but he is currently resting. He was admitted to the Healer's Wing with a minor ailment and should be better by the end of the week."

Wait… he was sick? But…

The world seemed to be closing around Anakin and it was getting hard to breathe.

No one was there… *why* wasn't anyone there? They'd *known* he'd be going to see Palpatine but… but Master Yoda was actually managing the situation for *him*, and it wasn't like Healer Girth *wanted* to get sick… but… then why?

And why did everything suddenly feel so out of his control?

It took several seconds of forced breathing before he figured it out. This… this was like *that day*, when he'd come back from Palpatine and needed to talk to someone from the Jedi Temple but *no one was there*.

"I… I need to speak with him," he tried, hating how strained his voice suddenly sounded.

"I'm afraid I can't let anyone disturb him," the healer on the comm said with a frown obvious even over the comm. "He needs his rest or the duration of the sickness will be prolonged."

He couldn't get enough *air*. His hand squeezed the stress ball in his

pocket like his life depended on it. (It just might.)

He wanted to argue, but for some reason the only thing that came to mind was reaching out with the Force and *making* her do what he needed and that was *not* acceptable. Right? He was having a hard time remembering *why*. He'd done it before. It would be fairly simple to find her Force Signature and then her throat…

His breath hitched as he realized what he was thinking.

No! He needed to *calm down*.

(Easier said than done.)

Around him, the other initiates were giving him worried glances but he couldn't deal with that right now, so he ignored them.

"I can get you in to see another mind-healer," the Jedi said, probably doing her job and trying for a compromise but it *wasn't helping*.

"No, thank you," he said, more calmly than he felt… more devoid of emotion (he couldn't let any out right now, he didn't – *couldn't* – trust himself). Even in his current state, he knew his reaction wasn't great, but he didn't know what he could do about it. So he shut off the comm before the other Jedi could say anything else.

His hand fumbled through his pocket for the breath mints and he hurriedly poured several onto his palm, then almost slammed them into his mouth. Remember that he is *here* and *now* and that is on Coruscant, near the Jedi Temple… that was *not* sitting in ruins as some sort of monument or repurposed by the Emperor.

'*What are five things you can see*,' he heard Girth's voice in his head ask.

He glanced around. Jedi Initiates, the Temple steps… just like when he'd – *NO*!

Here. And. Now.

The Coruscanti skyline. Speeders. The sky, just beginning to tint orange in the sunset of the polluted planet. The distant clouds.

Yes. There. Keep going.

'*Now, four things you can touch*.' His robes, the stress ball, the duracrete beneath his feet, the slight breeze.

'*Three things you can hear*.' Oh, he may have gotten four and three mixed up… but did it really matter? He hoped not. He could hear the distant traffic, the steps of the other children and the voice of their Jedi escort. He couldn't, for the life of him, remember the being's name.

'*Two things you can smell*,' the imaginary voice of his mind-healer continued. That was easy, he could smell the polluted Coruscanti air, now only mildly because they would filter the air around the Temple, but it was still there. He could also smell the mints in his mouth. Rather strongly.

That actually led to the last one. *'One thing you can taste.*' Well.

He did feel a little calmer, but that didn't stop the fact that he wasn't liking how similar this all felt – like the entire universe had conspired against him to take away anyone who could support him. Again.

"No," he told himself, shaking his head. "It's not that dire. You're fine, Skywalker." If he said it firmly enough or often enough, he should start believing it, right?

Now that he felt calmer, he forced himself to think his situation out more logically. He didn't *have* to talk to someone *right now* or in the know… but he really would *prefer* it. If he—

"Excuse me, Knight Rab'to?" A familiar voice broke through his thoughts and addressed the Jedi who had come to escort the children back. Ah, so that was his name.

"Oh! Master Windu!" the yellow-skinned alien said, bowing to the council member.

"Congratulations on fulfilling your mission in bringing the younglings home safely," the tall Jedi Master said serenely.

"Of course! And thank you, Master."

The bald Jedi nodded, then glanced at Anakin before looking back at their escort.

"May I borrow Initiate Skywalker?"

Anakin blinked because what?

"Of course," Knight Rab'to said, turning and gesturing for Anakin to

step forward. He did so, firmly, head held high.

"Thank you. I'll escort him back to his rooms when finished," Master Windu told the Jedi Knight.

"Thank you, Master," the yellow-skinned alien replied happily. "Farewell, Skywalker."

Anakin couldn't force a smile, but he could nod politely.

He followed the Council Member down the hallways away from his group of initiates and tried not to equate this to *that day* again. When he'd told Windu about Palpatine and it had all gone so wrong and…

Calm. Down. Skywalker. He told himself, only barely noticing that it sounded more like Vader in his head.

"Okay, what is going on?" Windu's voice broke through his small reverie again and he blinked, looking around. They were in a small, little-used hallway and Windu had stopped, looking very unimpressed.

Anakin blinked. What was Windu asking? What exactly did he know? What could Anakin tell him?

"Where's Master Yoda?" he returned as calmly as he could.

Windu snorted. "I'm pretty sure you know that he's taking care of this supposed threat we received."

Anakin frowned. "Supposed threat?"

If anything, the dark-skinned man looked even *more* unimpressed, and all the more intimidating for it. "Please. Master Yoda reporting a threat on the Temple? He hasn't taken the comm station duty for *years*."

The time traveler blinked. Oh.

That explained a lot.

"Someone could have told him," Anakin pointed out.

"Then he would have brought that person into the Council Meeting. This is utterly fake and I want to know *why!* What is the real threat against this Temple? I *know* you had something to do with this. The shatterpoint is unusually clear this time."

The initiate didn't wince, but it was a close thing. He looked down, wondering what he should say, regretting that his mints were almost gone. They went a long way to grounding him.

"It's your Sith Master, isn't it," Windu said quietly, surely, and most definitely not as a question.

A bolt of fear and anger shot through Anakin. "He is *not* my master!" he hissed, stepping forward in emphasis. Windu's eyebrows lifted in surprise at the visceral reaction and he held up his hands.

"Okay, okay, former master."

The concession didn't help much. Actually, it hurt more than he would have expected. Of *course* Mace 'Stubborn' Windu wouldn't accept Anakin as a Jedi or even as a non-Sith without someone practically prying it out of him.

"I'm *not* a Sith," he reiterated. Then the shame came to him and he looked away. "Not anymore."

The Korun Master didn't speak for several seconds. Anakin glanced up at him, ready to defend himself more, but found the man staring at him thoughtfully.

"No. You're not. We've been over this."

"Then why did you call him my Master?" Anakin asked dryly.

More contemplative silence. "Are you saying that as a former Sith, or as a former slave?"

Anakin's breath hitched and he had to fight to not step back in defense. He… hadn't expected Mace Windu to put that together. The man was intelligent, but set in his ways and very much someone who based his world-view off of logic. He didn't often make intuitive connections like that.

The time-traveler suddenly felt naked – stripped bare in front of this man with nothing to hide behind. It was terrifying. Almost as terrifying as if it were Sidious instead.

Almost.

The thought crossed his mind – a little hysterically – that this… this was likely how he would feel when he told the Council everything…

except worse. He was not looking forward to it.

Before he could find the words to answer, Windu sighed and waved his hand through the air. "Never mind. You don't have to answer that question if you do not wish to. I just want to know what the threat is. I could go to Yoda, but he'd just say this is *your* secret to tell, and he will only divulge it under the most dire of circumstances." He sounded frustrated, like he'd asked the Grandmaster before. Knowing that Master Yoda had kept his word and Anakin's secrets surprised him. He wasn't entirely sure why, except that he thought Yoda and Windu shared all their secrets. It was… actually kind of childish now that he thought about it. Of course that wouldn't necessarily be the case, and to be honest, he felt kind of touched at the grandmaster's thoughtfulness.

That begged the question, though; did he want to tell Mace Windu everything? Anything? Not that the man wouldn't know everything next week anyway, but… the idea of telling him made Anakin twinge. It was… just so similar to what had happened on the worst day of his life. And yet…

"Why do you want to know?" he asked, unsure of what answer he wanted from the man.

The Korun Master frowned. "To protect the Temple," he said as if it were obvious… and really, it was.

"You would… trust my word?"

He was stalling and he knew it, but… he also wanted that answer.

The bald man sighed again before fixing his gaze on Anakin. "I don't know what your… *previous* master has told you, or what kind of information you got on me, but I verify *everything*. Even if it comes from Master Yoda. Hence why I'm here."

Well… he had a point.

"So no, I won't just trust your word. But," Windu's voice softened a little and Anakin felt the older man's Force presence brush against his, hesitantly. Which was more than a little strange. Mace Windu was many things, but 'hesitant' wasn't one of them. "What I can promise is that I *will* listen, consider what you say, and take you seriously."

It felt a little childish but, it was the best Anakin would likely get and honestly, he was tired of carrying his secrets around. He had the

information he needed, the verification and files… he had everything he possibly could get to make them believe him.

And he had to start trusting sometime. Maybe trying to trust someone right now, when he felt so *weak*, would be another step forward – prove that he *can* get better… and he really wanted to. Especially after his thoughts about killing and forcing other people's actions earlier.

(And maybe, *just maybe*, he could prove to himself that his life wouldn't fall apart like it had on *that day*.)

So he took a deep breath and nodded.

"Okay, I'll… tell you everything, but not here." He looked around. They were still in a hallway and anyone could come up on them if they weren't paying attention. And the story he would tell would very likely take all of their attention.

"There's an unused meeting room back here," Windu said. "It's most often used for more private meetings with non-Jedi."

Anakin followed him down the hall and watched as the Jedi Master opened the door to a small room with a table in the center surrounded by chairs. Before they could enter, though, someone skidded around the corner of the hallway, practically a blur, drawing their attention.

"Anakin! There you are!" a familiar voice called.

The initiate blinked.

"Obi-wan?" he asked, almost in disbelief.

"I knew I sensed you over this way. You are *not* easy to find, but I could tell you weren't doing well so I—"

"Knight Kenobi!" Windu said sternly. The younger man froze in his tracks. "What are you wearing?"

Anakin blinked and finally registered Obi-wan's appearance. He was wearing a shift from the healer's wing under a blue robe that was *obviously* not his with how it practically drowned him. Both garments almost exactly matched what Siri had worn when she'd barged out of the healer's wing all those years ago to invade Anakin's mind-healing session when he'd confronted Master Yoda about his daughter.

Right. Obi-wan was still supposed to be under observation in the

Healer's Wing.

Oh Force.

Anakin felt his jaw move but no sound came out as he tried to process that.

"Er… a… robe?" Obi-wan answered, both sheepish and defiant somehow, because *Obi-wan.*

"Can you explain to me why you aren't in the Healer's Wing?" the taller man asked, arms folded and his typical glare in place, thankfully fixed on the knight and not the initiate.

"I'm fine! I was merely there for observation!" the red-head protested.

Windu put a hand to his forehead and began to kneed it. "Obi-wan," he started, but cut off when a burst of laughter forced its way out of Anakin.

Both of the older men turned to look at him in unison and it just made everything *funnier*. He couldn't keep in another laugh. And that suddenly, he found himself doubled over, laughing so hard he could barely breathe. It felt… good.

"I'm glad my worry makes you laugh," Obi-wan snarked, pulling the robe around him (just like Siri had, for the same reason, which drew more laughter from the time traveler), but Anakin could tell he didn't mean it cruelly.

"You and Siri," he wheezed, "you're two of a kind. She did the exact same thing." Albeit to tear him a new one instead of out of sheer worry, but still…

Obi-wan blinked, and a little color came to his cheeks. "She did?" he asked, amused.

"And I'm sure they made her go back to the healer's wing too," Windu said sternly.

The red-head turned to look at the taller man. "Master," he started, but the Korun Master held up a hand.

"Skywalker is fine. I give you my word."

Obi-wan didn't look convinced and glanced over at a still chuckling Anakin.

The initate smiled, small but genuine. "I am fine. Thank you for coming, Obi-wan. Really." Anakin didn't think the man knew how much him coming running like that just to make sure the time-traveler was alright meant to him.

The red-head visibly relaxed. "Good."

"I was actually about to tell Master Windu everything," Anakin commented casually.

Obi-wan blinked, taken aback by that. "Oh… my."

"*You* know?" Windu asked, looking like he wanted to throw his hands in the air.

"In my defense, it was because of a shared vision in the Force," Obi-wan said hurriedly.

"True," Anakin said. "But I was going to tell you anyway."

Obi-wan looked touched. "Really?"

Anakin nodded. "I don't know how much I would have been able to actually say, but…"

The older man smiled. "Thank you, Anakin. I—"

"Need to get back to the healer's wing," Windu cut in firmly. "*Now*."

Obi-wan huffed. "Oh, very well." Then he glanced at Anakin. "Will you come visit me later?"

Anakin nodded again. He remembered why he hadn't wanted to talk to Obi-wan, but that baggage seemed far smaller than it had just a couple of minutes ago. Knowing everything, his brother had still come for him. That was not something he could overlook. Nor would he want to.

"I will see you then," Obi-wan said, then turned to walk away.

"Directly to the Healer's Wing!" Windu called after him. "No stops, no side trips… I will talk to Knight Eerin about it!"

The red-head looked highly offended. "You wouldn't!"

"Try me."

Anakin snickered again, wishing he had something he could snack on as he watched this interaction.

Obi-wan grumbled something they couldn't hear and turned to stalk off. After a couple of seconds (and another sigh), the Council Member gestured into the still open room and stepped inside. Anakin followed. The door closed behind them and Windu gestured for the initiate to sit as he did so himself. Anakin took the chair next to him and swiveled to face him, his mirth already, sadly, dissipating.

"Alright, what can you tell me about the Sith and their threat to the Temple?" Windu asked.

The time-traveler took a slow, deep breath, trying not to let it visibly show, before he fixed his gaze on the other man.

"First, there's something you need to know about me. I am not from the past as you suspected, I'm from the future."

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Mace stared at the child in front of him almost unable to comprehend the words that had just come out of his mouth.

He blinked. "What."

The boy nodded solemnly. "I was born Anakin Skywalker. The only other name I have had was my Sith Name: Darth Vader." The boy actually shuddered a little when he said it. He either *really* didn't like associating with that name, or he was the best actor Mace had ever seen.

"You're… from the future…" he repeated, making sure he hadn't misunderstood.

Skywalker paused, looking thoughtful. "From *a* future."

And *finally*, Windu's mind began to work again. He put it all together – that last piece of the puzzle he needed to really understand Anakin Skywalker. The boy's wisdom and intelligence, but his attachment to his mother and ability to connect with his peers – a random adult stranger likely wouldn't have had those. His knowledge about Jedi in general despite his obvious dark side training. So many things started to make sense… but if that were the case, then…

The Sith in the Senate *would be* Skywalker's Master… which means the

Sith didn't *know* about anything if he'd read the kid right and…

"You used to be a knight," he said. Or a master, but he'd bet on knight.

Skywalker nodded.

"You fell."

Again the boy nodded, although his mouth tightened and his fists clenched before he did.

"I never was a very good Jedi. Part of that was being groomed for years by my *former* master," he spit the last of that sentence out angrily. This kid had so much rage in him… and yet he was far better than when he'd first come…

So. Much. Sense.

"I married the love of my life in secret just before the Jedi went off to fight a war."

"You what? Wait, *a what*?" Mace interrupted because Jedi didn't fight wars… not as a whole. Not like the kid was implying.

The boy just raised an eyebrow on an otherwise deadpan face. "A war. Galactic wide. Set up by Sidious."

So that was the name of the Sith.

Right, that was what Mace had come for. Something had happened and he needed to know who could attack so he could defend the Temple. (That included the kid in front of him – in both capacities – whether said kid wanted to acknowledge that or not.)

"Who is the Sith," he asked after a couple of calming breaths. "Will you tell me?"

The boy hesitated, not necessarily out of *fear*, but definitely out of wariness. He still didn't trust Mace… and the Korun Master couldn't say he really blamed the kid.

After several seconds of silence, though, the boy nodded and licked his lips. "Palpatine."

Mace must have heard wrong because he thought Skywalker said that a *Sith* was currently *the Chancellor of the Republic*.

What.

"As in Sheeve Palpatine?" He prayed the kid had misspoken, but the boy simply nodded and suddenly Mace Windu's day went from 'surprising and annoying' to 'universe exploding if we don't fix this'.

"Don't go after him – not without the entire Council's knowledge," Skywalker stated firmly.

That took Mace back. "Why would I do that?" he asked, shocked. Did the kid not know him at all in the future?

"That's what you did the last time I told you," the boy said softly, practically whispering, as if more to himself than to Mace.

"I what?" Mace asked because that made no sense.

"To be fair, there weren't many other masters on planet," Skywalker continued, although his eyes looked distant, as if he wasn't in that room with Mace at all. "And we'd been through a three and a half year galactic war… so many people died, all because one man wanted power." Then his eyes focused on Mace again. "We'd known there was a Sith for a long time at that point, but we couldn't find him. He's that good. And a more than competent fighter. I do not know when he finds the time to practice.

"In any case, I told you, you took four masters over to arrest him, but I had to follow. I had to see. He'd convinced me he had a way to save my wife from dying in childbirth. I wanted to make sure you arrested him, but walked in to find the three other masters dead and you standing above him, ready to kill him right then and there."

His eyes had gone distant again and Mace wasn't sure he should interrupt, even if he saw so many problems with the boy's story he didn't know where to start. What had that war done to him? To them?

"He'd convinced me you wouldn't help me save my wife… so I chose him. By doing so, I chose to fall… and that night, I helped him completely destroy the temple."

His voice had gone completely devoid of emotion, the distance accompanied by a sort of emptiness that worried Mace.

"Destroyed the temple?" he asked slowly, carefully.

"I took the armies we'd been leading to war, brainwashed by

Palpatine's manipulations, and overwhelmed the bare amount of Jedi left in the temple. The ones in the field were killed by their own troops. And I actively helped; killed men, women… children. Anyone in my way."

"To… save your wife?"

The boy took a deep breath, smiling in self recrimination. "I realized why Jedi aren't supposed to have attachments not long after I fell. Or perhaps I knew all along but just didn't want to admit it, or thought myself above it. Or perhaps I was simply so desperate for love I didn't care." He looked up. "Don't change that rule. Or do, if you wish – perhaps there should be more exceptions than there are now, but I should not have been one of them. Not with my selfish need to be loved and supported in ways the Jedi *couldn't*… and I didn't know the difference. I didn't think I could possibly be a danger." He looked down and shook his head. "I was a fool."

They fell into silence again as Mace processed everything he'd been told. He wasn't sure what to think of Skywalker's confession. The temple… destroyed? The very idea just… didn't compute. The Sith *won*?

Skywalker was here for redemption, he realized suddenly, and more of the puzzle made so much sense.

He wasn't entirely sure how he should feel about that. In his experience, darksiders didn't *try* for redemption.

"How far in the future are you from?" he asked, voice more strained than he would have liked.

The boy snorted quietly. "Thirty-five years, give or take."

Mace could only nod as he tried to grasp all of the implications now open to him. Funny, it had never occurred to him to not believe Skywalker. It just made too much sense – not perfect sense though, which was why he found himself believing the boy.

No, the man…

From the future.

(He'd still verify it with Yoda. And perhaps the boy's mind-healers. And Knight Kenobi. This was too unusual to not follow up on.)

"So, what now?" Skywalker asked, slumping tiredly in his seat. For a moment, he didn't look like a child, but an old man in a child's body… which made sense. That's what he literally was.

"Now… we wait for Yoda," Mace said, sending off a text message to the Grandmaster. "And we discuss plans."

The boy looked surprised for a second, but then he smiled, albeit wanly. "That… is a good idea."

Mace nodded. "I'm glad we agree."

And they sat back to wait.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thanks to Quathis, Hidden50 and Khalthar for their help on this!

Thank you for reading!

Discord: https://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin watched Mace Windu sit back after putting the information disk down, Dooku's holo fading away. Then the time-traveler glanced over at Master Yoda sitting on the couch opposite Master Windu. The old troll looked perfectly content to let Windu contemplate everything he'd seen, so Anakin took a cue from that and sat back, ready to wait.

They waited several minutes in silence until the bald man finally sat up again.

"Why did you not come to the Council with this?" he asked Anakin in a hard tone.

The initiate met his gaze. "I am planning on it. Next week."

"After the gala – the one during which you want to give this information out to Senators," Windu said pointedly, not quite accusingly but Anakin could read the subtext.

"I personally know the senators I have chosen," the time traveler explained calmly. "Two of them were large parts of the rebellion in the future and one is so disgusted with the Republic, her planet left and joined the Confederacy. At this point in time, I am hoping that slipping her this information will help to mend that rift, but I believe she is just as trustworthy as the other two."

Windu fell silent again, but looked troubled. Finally, he shook his head, still gazing at Anakin. "Why do you find it so difficult to trust us?"

The former Sith felt his hackles rise. How dare *Mace Windu*, of all people, ask him that? But he took several deep breaths and forced himself to study the man in front of him. He looked genuine, if pained, so Anakin decided to take the question seriously. *He doesn't know*, he reminded himself.

"To answer that, you must understand my history with the Council and the Jedi Order," he said. "My first memory of a Jedi was Qui-gon Jinn. Jinn went out of his way to free me from slavery and even though he warned me that the life of a Jedi wasn't easy, I wanted

nothing more than to be someone who would go around rescuing slaves like that. I idolized him and he practically promised I would become a Jedi. Not in so many words, because Jinn isn't that sloppy, but it still shocked and hurt me when I went before the Council, was completely honest, and they still rejected me because I feared for my mother – my *enslaved* mother who we left on a hostile planet.

"That was on top of the scrutiny in general; A bunch of old men and women basically looking me over, telling me I wasn't good enough. It reminded me of when Gardulla would parade slaves to sell."

Both Windu and Yoda looked surprised at that. "That was not our intention," the head Council Member assured.

"Perhaps," Anakin allowed, "but at the age of nine and as a freshly freed slave, would I have been able to discern that?"

No. And they all knew it.

"This is why we don't take older children," Mace muttered.

"One of many reasons, it is," Yoda said.

Anakin shrugged. "If I'd been given a more realistic view of what to expect, I think it would have been easier for me to accept a rejection. Or maybe it simply wouldn't have been so difficult to accept that I wasn't the right fit. Either way, Jinn refused to let me go, convinced I would fulfill the prophecy of the Chosen One." He snorted derisively. "His dying request to his Padawan in that timeline was to train me. It didn't help that me being supposedly destined to fulfill that prophecy leaked all over the Temple."

Windu closed his eyes slowly and rubbed his forehead. "That sounds like Qui-gon."

Anakin felt his expression dry out. "And yet, you gave him a padawan to begin with."

"Necessary, it was," Yoda said.

"For who? For Jinn or Obi-wan? From what I understand, you used Obi-wan like a therapy stand-in and threw him at Jinn. Exactly how ethical is it to use children like that?"

"Now wait," Windu started, but Anakin held up his hand.

"I've actually spoken to Jinn since his death – in visions mostly – and he has said as much himself. He told me outright he thinks Obi-wan grew into a great Jedi *in spite* of him, not *because* of him. Now," he took a breath, ignoring the surprise on the others' faces, "I won't say I completely agree. He wasn't a terrible Jedi and he must have taught Obi-wan some things well, but there *were serious* problems with their dynamic – problems that *should* have been addressed with regular check ups with a mind-healer. This coming from a former Sith."

"You… speak to Qui-gon Jinn in… visions?" Windu asked slowly.

"And of course, that's what you take away from that. Yes," Anakin said with a sigh. "He studied something called the ways of the Whills and that helped him to maintain his presence and sense of self in the Force."

Both Yoda and Windu stared at him. He simply raised an eyebrow at them in return.

"Perhaps return to the matter at hand, we should," Yoda finally said, although his tone said they would return to that topic at a later date.

"Fine," the older human said shortly, "but we will come back to this at some point in the future." Heh, funny that Yoda could convey in tone what Windu had to in words.

Anakin didn't let his amusement show, though, and shrugged. He had no problem explaining something like the Whills to the Jedi Master. It would be interesting to see his reaction, actually. (Although, to be fair, he didn't know much about them himself, but he figured the basics would just have to do.)

"In any case," he decided to take charge and move forward, "I can no longer personally give the information to the senators at the Gala. Sidious will watch me too closely. Me and anyone else I interact with. Master Yoda – any master really – will be too conspicuous, so…"

"Isn't this another reason why you should just take it to the Council first?" Windu asked.

Anakin turned a glare on him. "The last time I did that, four Jedi – including yourself – went to arrest him and got themselves killed."

"That won't happen here," Windu insisted.

"Then what *will* that Council do?" Anakin asked, dryly. "What are their

options? Use it to confront Palpatine? Use it in a court case? Do you have *any* idea how quickly he will be able to fabricate alibis if we give him the chance? And then we'll have tipped our hand!"

"This is a Jedi matter!"

"Then you would simply go in and arrest him? You do remember what I *just said,* correct? Handling this internally is not an option with how ingrained he is in the Senate, and you *know* it! We need to let the Senate *and* the public know what is going on before we move. Right now he has the majority vote *for a reason*. He has half the Senate in his pocket and has convincingly fooled the rest in some way or another, and the general public is no different!

"Taking the information to the Council so they can spend months deliberating and *not acting* will only hurt our chances! And that's the *best case scenario.*"

The bald man's mouth had thinned into a line and he turned to Yoda. "You agree with this?"

"Hmm," the diminutive master said. "Wrong, he is not. Act quickly, we must."

"It's not for us to make unilateral decisions for the Jedi," Windu pointed out through a frown that would have intimidated Anakin before he'd Fallen. It certainly came across as menacing.

But now, he had little issue brushing the man's displeasure off.

"This is my information that I found and put together. I am making unilateral decisions regarding that, not the Jedi."

Windu still didn't look happy as he switched his gaze between Yoda and Anakin, but eventually he closed his eyes, rubbed the bridge of his nose as if to will away a headache, and then sat back. "Fine. This is on you, though," he said to Yoda.

The old master conceded with a nod.

"So then, what *do* we do with the information if we cannot get it to the Senators?" Windu asked, obviously exasperated despite his mask of calm. "Why not just send them via carrier? That should be inconspicuous enough."

Anakin immediately shook his head. "This information *cannot* leak.

Even if most mail reaches the intended recipients, there are still hundreds of *thousands* that don't through error alone. We cannot take a chance on even the smallest of odds. Besides, Palpatine is having the Temple watched. Unless someone sneaks over to the Senate building or the Senators' homes, they will have anyone taking anything from the Temple marked – and even then, I wouldn't trust that we'd gotten away with it."

"We send things out all the time," Windu replied, deadpan.

"He is very thorough."

The older man didn't look like he quite believed Anakin, but said nothing. Smart man. His stubbornness still bothered the time traveler.

"You don't seem to understand what we are up against," the time-traveler heard himself say, looking the Jedi Master in the eyes. "This is the man who is a part of – currently in charge of – an order that has kept itself completely under the radar for *centuries*. Not only that, he was able to hide – in one life time – for literal decades, *right under the nose of the Jedi*, interacting with them and leading the Order around by the nose. He is *so good* at acting, that even now *I* cannot always tell exactly when he lies, only make educated guesses, and I spent twenty three years under that man's thumb, not to mention at least fourteen more years being groomed to become his perfect apprentice.

"This man is not just a player of the long game, he is a *Grandmaster*. And he did not get where he is today by being sloppy."

He cut off as he realized he was getting too heated and took several breaths. After a moment, he released his frustration and anger to the Force, but by the disturbed expression on the other man's face, something must have gotten through that thick skull. Good.

"Younglings," Yoda finally said.

Anakin and Windu both found themselves blinking in confusion before turning to the Grandmaster. "What?" they asked simultaneously.

"Deliver the information, the younglings can."

A pregnant pause fell over the room as the two humans stared at Yoda.

"Absolutely not," Anakin protested once he'd finally gotten his brain to catch up with the non-sequitur.

"Is that wise?" Windu asked at the same time. They once again exchanged glances, disconcerted at being more or less on the same page before turning back to the Grandmaster.

"Watched, they will not be. Dismissed. Overlooked. Interested in them, Palpatine is not."

Anakin shook his head. "It is still too risky."

"These are initiates who don't even have a master," Windu agreed.

"Be there, I will be. Other masters too. Underestimate the children, you do."

"They'll be in a situation where they have little backup," the Korun master argued. "You're taking three other masters and there will be a minimum of twenty children."

"Pair up, they can."

"That would be too obvious," Anakin said, shaking his head. "Too many of them serve different senators."

"It would split his attention, though," Windu muttered, sounding grumpy. Anakin shot him a betrayed look.

"Speak to the Senate I will," Master Yoda finally said. "The youngling's first function, this is. A reasonable request, it is, that bring a friend, they can."

"Wait," Windu sat forward, eyes focused on the older being, "you're proposing that we bring in *more* targets?"

"Then take more masters, we can," Yoda replied with a shrug.

Could this work? As much as Anakin didn't like it… no. "They will give it away. Everyone knows what padawans are first like when they're initially taken." He wasn't about to give up on this.

"Some training, we can give," the old troll countered. "Difficult, it should not be. Tell them of the Sith, we will not. Give it away, they cannot."

"We have to tell them there is danger, though," Windu argued. "And keep them away from Palpatine."

"No, we don't," Anakin said, "because they will not be going."

"Be there already, they will be," Yoda pointed out. "Change this, we cannot."

"You're underestimating him again," the time-traveler warned.

Windu shook his head. "Not if you're keeping him occupied."

Anakin opened his mouth, then closed it again with no sound coming out of it. For the first time, he saw the plan – saw that it *really could* work… but still…

Finally, he caught a hold of one last thought. "He'll have spies there."

"A better plan, have you?" Yoda asked, sounding genuinely curious.

This time, the initiate grit his teeth because he really didn't. Just… the idea of sending children into any room with Sidious… but Yoda was right. Sidious wasn't interested in them. He'd overlook them. Maybe some of his spies wouldn't but that was a big if. Most people didn't regard children as worth watching in functions like the Gala. As long as they didn't draw attention to themselves…

"You have to train them," Anakin finally conceded, feeling as if the words were pulled out of his teeth with a hydrospanner. "And I have to pass them off."

"Hmm. Very well," Yoda acquiesced… far more easily than Anakin thought he would. But he wanted the children to be safe too… despite his suggestion…

"I'll help," Windu said.

Anakin blinked at him. "You? Teach children classes?"

The Jedi Master shot him the look that basically proved Anakin's point. "You think I can't?"

"I think you scare more or less every child you come across… including myself when I was really this age."

It was Windu's turn to stare at Anakin. "I'll keep that in mind."

Anakin returned the nod, conceding, and then the room fell into silence.

After several uncomfortable seconds, he decided that he just didn't have the mental bandwidth to deal with any of this any more today.

For the first time in a very *long* time, he would be going to bed early and would *sleep*.

"Is there anything else we need to discuss right now?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound as tired as he felt.

The two masters exchanged glances.

Then Yoda nodded.

"Yes. Have something to say, I do," the old master said, to Anakin's surprise. He'd been expecting Windu to say something. "Apologize to you, I must. Healer Girth, available, I thought he would be. Realized only after, did I, that in the healers wing, he was."

"That was quite the oversight," Windu said dryly to Yoda. It was getting a little disconcerting, how much Anakin had agreed with the man today. He still nodded, because the Korun master was, indeed, right. "Would you even have known if I hadn't sent you a comm text?"

The older master sighed and shook his head. "Old, I have become. Lax. Set in my ways. Work on this, I will. My word you have."

Anakin studied him for several seconds before he nodded, as did Master Windu.

"Then," he decided to return the olive branch, "I would like to thank you for keeping my secrets." He was grateful, after all, and certainly wanted to encourage good habits. The Force knew the Jedi needed it.

"Expect me not to, did you?" Yoda asked, one of his own eyebrows raised.

Anakins shrugged. "Old habits."

"Hmm," the green troll muttered, then shrugged. "Welcome, you are."

They fell into silence again, but only for a couple of seconds before Windu spoke up again.

"Skywalker's right. We've hashed this out as much as we can right now. So we should probably call it a night."

"Please," Anakin said, using the Force to draw the data disk to him. Windu raised an eyebrow at him, but said nothing, so the initiate ignored it.

"Very well," Yoda agreed with a nod and scooted forward to slide down off of the chair he'd been sitting on. "Meet again soon, we should."

"I'll set up the emergency training for the initiates and their plus one," the Korun master said as he stood. He also looked at Anakin. "That means you can bring an extra person too."

The time-traveler opened his mouth to protest – he wasn't about to bring a child into any game between himself and Palpatine, that went against everything he'd just… right about then, the words Windu had spoken registered and he paused.

"Anyone?" he asked slowly.

Windu nodded. "Probably a good idea if you ask a knight or a master."

Well, that changed things.

Anakin thought about it and realized that yes, bringing someone with experience who could help run interference would take a weight off of his shoulders.

But who should he bring? He didn't want either one of his mind-healers to be there with Sidious, as funny as it would be to see Girth tearing every single thing the man said down and informing him of how toxic what he just said was… Okay, the drall probably wouldn't do that, but the picture that came to Anakin's mind still made him smile.

He had a couple of other people he could choose from though… so why was the Force nudging him in one particular direction?

"I'll have to think about it… and then I'll let you know," he said.

Windu just nodded. "Good evening, Initiate."

"And you, Master Windu, Master Yoda," Anakin said before walking confidently out of the room.

He strode down the hall, still thinking. He wished Siri was there. He'd definitely take her along, as she was trained in at least some Jedi Shadow techniques and could easily lie to Palpatine's face. But she wasn't there. He'd actually just gotten a text from her that morning saying she and Jango were likely very close to finding Ferus. He wished her luck, but also wished she could be back here with him for

just that one night.

Not for the first time, he recognized the hole he felt in his life where she'd been – where she *should* be…

But sending her on that mission had been the right thing to do, he was sure of it… so…

He didn't want to take Windu. The man was just too confrontational and easy to read if someone knew his tells – which he was sure Palpatine did. Definitely not Master Yoda – who would already be there anyway, besides, monopolizing his time would be suspicious – and Anakin wanted to take someone who knew…

Which left one person.

Someone Palpatine hadn't met more than once yet. Someone Palpatine would likely underestimate.

Someone Anakin would like to go on one last mission with – partially for old-time's sake but partially because he knew he could trust them to have his back.

Oh, and his wandering feet had taken him to the halls of healing. What a coincidence.

Sometimes he really did just want to tear the Force a new one… physically, metaphysically or verbally, any would do.

Well, he could check on Healer Girth as well, he supposed and walked inside.

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"Anakin," Obi-wan said from his bed as the time-traveler walked into his room. The older man smiled, relieved. "I didn't expect you to come so soon, but I am glad you did." Then his smile faded to concern. It was such a familiar expression that it almost hurt to see.

"What happened?" the knight asked quietly.

Anakin sighed. "Palpatine. He's figured out that I'm connected to the Sith somehow. I'm not sure exactly how, but I'm preparing for the worst – that he's figured out I am… or used to be, Vader. Maybe he just thinks I'm a naive informant or something but…" He shook his head.

"In any case, I had to get Master Yoda to get me out of there, and I'm supposed to talk to someone after every session, but when I got back here, Master Xio was in an emergency session, Master Yoda was taking care of the excuse he made to get me back to the Temple and Healer Girth was sick. He's here in the Healer's Ward. I… may have panicked somewhat and fallen back onto bad habits."

Obi-wan's concern only deepened. Then his brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Then why did I see you with Master Windu?"

Anakin snorted. "He wanted to know what was going on, figured I was involved and he came to ask me. Somehow it got around to me telling him everything… which was when you stepped in." Anakin raised an eyebrow at him cheekily. "Or came barreling in half-naked."

"I was not half-naked!"

The time-traveler's smile just widened and Obi-wan huffed good-naturedly.

Then Anakin's smile faded and he sighed. "After I told him a short version of everything, Master Yoda came by and we made plans about what to do with the evidence I have that could incriminate Palpatine to a point where the Jedi could make a move."

Obi-wan's eyebrows rose. "You have that? Already?"

Anakin's expression dried out. "It's been two years – almost three – since I came back." It simultaneously didn't feel like that long and yet also seemed much, *much* longer.

"In any case, I was going to give it away at the Gala as I can't visit the Senators I would like to give the information to without looking suspicious – especially with Palpatine's recent revelations. I cannot do so anymore as he will be watching me the entire time and I do not want to incriminate these Senators. So Master Yoda, Master Windu, and I are… coming up with another plan," that he just did not want to get into more than the basics about right now, "and they said I can bring a second person. All of the Ambassadors can have a plus one."

Obi-wan looked quiet, his face completely blank, for several seconds before he opened his mouth and asked, quietly, "And you… chose me?"

Anakin took a deep breath and nodded slowly.

"Even after everything I… my other self did to you?"

Right. Anakin wondered just how often he'd have to address this.

"First of all, you are not him. You said so yourself.

"Second of all… what happened was just as much my fault as it was his – more, in my opinion (although the most blame still lies with Sidious, of course)."

He sighed. "There is… baggage between us, and I can't be your padawan – not again. But there's no one I trust more to watch my back than you."

Which… was true, with maybe the exception of Siri, but he didn't have the same long history he had with Obi-wan – even if not *this* Obi-wan. At their core, they were the same.

"Besides," he couldn't help but add on with a wry grin, "I don't know anyone else who can completely lie his way through a meeting with someone and have them coming out thinking they've won quite like you can."

Obi-wan flushed and looked away. "You mean the older me."

Anakin shrugged. "I think you can do this… and I don't really trust anyone else to be able to. No one I'm close enough to, in any case.

"So," he stood straight and walked forward with his hand held out, "What do you say? Skywalker and Kenobi, one more time?"

The knight looked down at the offered hand and then back up to Anakin's face. "Only if it isn't the last time," he replied with a grin and took the hand, shaking it.

"I can deal with that," the time-traveler replied with a grin.

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Anakin walked away from the Healer's wing smiling from ear to ear. He'd checked on Healer Girth on the way out and he felt like he had some of the good parts of his old life back. It was nice. He wasn't sure if it would last, but… he would appreciate it now and store up memories for later.

Perhaps the bad times would come again, but he would have a stronger base to work from this time. He would make sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

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AN: Thank you to my lovely betas: Khalthar, Hidden50 and Quathis!

Discord: https://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Anakin went back to see Obi-wan the next day to plan (because the knight would want a plan, even if Anakin knew it would likely never survive first contact – so maybe a couple of back-ups, too, because it's Obi-wan), he found the red-head with a hand to his mouth looking into the distance… away from the window, so lost in thought he didn't even notice Anakin come in.

Once he managed to startle the man out of his obvious mental spiral, it took Anakin both far longer and far shorter than he thought he would need to get Obi-wan to admit that he was worried about the mission – about leaving Ferus to come back to no master at the temple, since they were going to face a Sith. (Also about Ferus, period.)

It both reminded Anakin of how warmhearted the man was, and how much jealousy he still harbored towards Ferus – as ridiculous as it was because he wasn't going to be Obi-wan's padawan, even if (Force forbid) Ferus never came back.

At that point, Anakin reminded the knight that Siri would make sure Ferus was taken care of. He even passed on the message Siri had sent him about them being so close to finding and rescuing Ferus.

Of course, Obi-wan had to ask who 'them' was.

The following conversation about Jango Fett had been… awkward, but in the end Obi-wan realized that his padawan would be coming back one way or another with those two on the case. Siri was a force of nature and Jango Fett was *literally* the best non-sensitive in the bounty hunting business, and it did seem to help him feel better about the situation. Even if he still had his reservations.

Fair.

After that, coming up with a plan and a couple of contingencies for the gala wasn't very difficult. What *was* difficult boiled down to coming up with *reasons* for the plans and contingencies that didn't show their hand to Palpatine. He couldn't know any of the Jedi knew about him now. It would give him far too much insight and potential

leverage, not to mention a chance to screw with them and their future plans. That was their worst case scenario – if Palpatine figured out what they knew in nearly any capacity. Even if they managed to get the info to the senators, it would be damage control at best. This was delicate and the actions they took would ultimately be less scrutinized than the reasons they took said actions.

Anakin hated those kinds of missions. They never had been his strong point.

Eventually, though, the two of them came up with some decent reasons for any happenstances. Well, most happenstances. When the two of them were involved, no one knew when it would go KUBAR. Anakin left Obi-wan feeling far better about the entire mission in general.

He went racing that night and slept deeply once he got back.

The next day, everyone was talking about how the Jedi Ambassadors had been given permission to bring a friend with them, but anyone going would have to attend mandatory training sessions. Anakin hadn't seen the children so excited since their lesson on the Agricorps and Exploracorps. That excitement only expanded when the younglings assembled in one of the larger rooms later that day and Mace Windu walked through the door.

The room immediately fell into silence as the children stared in awe. Instead of simply accepting this as the Windu Anakin remembered would have, he seemed annoyed by it. The time-traveler had to hide his snicker at that. Had Anakin's comment during their conversation been that much of a surprise? It almost didn't compute that the Windu from his timeline had truly not noticed the children's fear of him. Or perhaps he had he just brushed that fear off as respect?

In any case, while the Korun Master began to lecture the class on their mission, currently proposed as a training exercise for their own safety, Master Yoda took Anakin aside and began to ask him questions about Qui-gon and the Whills. Anakin explained what he could but in the end, he didn't know much. Yoda still seemed to appreciate his answers anyway and vowed that he would look into the matter himself.

Anakin got back to the lesson just in time to hear Windu tell the children that they would only be allowed to go to the gala if they passed the test they'd set up. Someone (Anakin, though they didn't know it) would be watching a drop-off point from a distance and the

younglings had two days during certain hours to pass off said test. They could take the test multiple times and Anakin would even interact with some of them to make sure they could handle some extra pressure. He'd promised to take extensive notes and give them to Master Windu and Master Yoda, who would both go over them and have notes of their own.

"And one last thing," Master Windu said. "You are *only* allowed to tell one of the Senators about the training exercise if they specifically ask about it. Even if the Chancellor himself speaks to you – which he shouldn't," he shot a pointed look at Anakin, who mentally sighed, "you cannot say anything. If you are asked why you have given anything to your specific Senator, tell them that you are giving them thank-you gifts for your time in their service or some assistance they have provided you."

Ah, yes, that had been a rather brilliant idea from Master Yoda as well. Each of the children would be giving a gift to two or three senators as discreetly as possible. The thing was, if they were caught and interrogated – by whatever means, be they kind and in front of the guests at the gala, or, in the worst case scenario, behind closed doors with Sith torture (and Anakin would do *anything* he possibly could to prevent that) – the children wouldn't *know* anything. They would have a plausible story for deniability and a reason for keeping a 'secret'.

Anakin was rather pleased with that, actually.

"You will all be graded on this at the end of the gala as well. Now, if you have any questions, you may approach Master Yoda or myself. You may pick up your 'test gift' at the door. Dismissed."

He stood there stoically as the children rose to their feet and looked quietly around, nervously glancing between each other before slowly making their way over to Master Yoda. Anakin almost cackled outright at the micro-expression on his face. At least until a couple of brave children worked up their courage to approach the Kourn Master. He answered them as kindly and patiently as he possibly could and honestly, his demeanor surprised Anakin. He sent his approval through the Force. Windu glanced at him dryly and rolled his eyes before returning to the children with a warm smile.

Anakin spent the next two days perched in just the right place to be invisible from the 'drop off' point while he watched for pairs of young initiates trying to pass the first iteration of their 'test'. Three pairs, at

most, would have passed it off if Anakin hadn't thoroughly believed they all needed to be more subtle. After three hours, all the children had come by and Anakin turned in the notes.

He was informed that everyone wanted to try again that afternoon. This time, he saw notable improvement from each pair, so someone (Master Windu?) had spoken to them privately and worked with them. Even when he ventured from his hiding spot and would 'run into' them or even call them away and talk with them about some random topic (most often, the gala itself), they surprisingly kept their cool.

Anakin still believed that they needed more practice, though. He made sure to give both positive and negative points about each pair and fully expected they would try again the next morning. They did and while the improvement wasn't as noticeable of a leap for most pairs, it was still there and he found that he had to pass off some of them at least. The remainder tried their final time that afternoon and to Anakin's relief, they all succeeded. Oh, none of them would likely be shadow or black ops material, but they were adequate enough not to be too obvious, and in this instance, that was all they needed.

It still made Anakin nervous, but even he knew that he couldn't hold these children to his exacting standards with the short amount of time they had. They were Jedi, true, but they weren't Obi-wan, Anakin, Ahsoka, Starkiller or Luke. They weren't prodigies. Master Yoda had gone over that point with him many times.

(He was kind of relieved they had gone over it because he doubted he would have remembered otherwise.)

Then it was the day before the gala and Anakin had all day to talk about it with his friends (them, excitedly, him, not so much), and one final session with Girth, who seemed to be feeling much better and was livid that the healers hadn't let Anakin speak with him. He'd given them an earful from what Anakin had heard. Part of him felt sorry for the healers. Part of him nurtured a little warmth that someone would stand up for him, not *just* against the Jedi Council, but the entire Jedi Healer Wing (arguably more terrifying than the Jedi Council).

They spent nearly the entire session going through what could happen during the gala – which actually helped Anakin calm down immensely. Towards the end, though, he brought up something that surprised Anakin.

"One more thing before you go," Girth said with a soft smile. "About

the other day, when no one was available, from what I understand, you almost had a panic attack. Is that correct?"

Anakin withheld a sigh and nodded. "Almost relapsed too," he muttered, still upset at himself.

Then Girth shook his head and his smile grew wider, eyes never leaving Anakin. "Then I am *so proud* of you for calming yourself down. That isn't easy *with* a support system, let alone without one. You have come so far in such a short amount of time and it is truly astounding. Well done, Anakin."

The time-traveler didn't quite know what to say to that because that had been such a small thing… although, thinking back, it hadn't *felt* small at the time.

Still, he found it difficult to really accept Girth's praise.

He was working on it.

After a moment, he took a deep breath and nodded his head. This was Girth's opinion and it was valid, and he could accept it, even if he didn't necessarily agree with it. So he nodded and smiled. "Thank you."

"You are welcome," the drall replied. "Although, I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it."

The initiate chuckled once, amused. "I know."

"Then how about you head out for today? Get some good sleep tonight. Remember you have people here for you if something goes wrong tomorrow, okay?"

Anakin nodded again, feeling himself relax, even as he stood from his seat. "Good night, Healer Girth."

"Goodnight, Initiate Skywalker," the drall said generously, nodding.

The time-traveler didn't dare believe that the next day would go smoothly, but he could hope.

It felt so good to hope again.

xXx

Siri sat in the co-pilot seat on the Slave I, waiting for a message from

their contact. If all went well today, they would be extracting Ferus in as soon as two days. Even waiting that long killed her, but… they had to get Ferus out and cover their tracks. She wouldn't do this half-way.

Meanwhile, she was going over the laws of the region they'd tracked Ferus to, in case they had to talk themselves out of this. She absently twirled her much shorter hair around her finger, not noticing the red color anymore. The first few days after she'd dyed it, she'd almost surprised herself every time she'd seen it out of the corner of her eye or looked in a mirror. That hadn't been the first time she'd regretted going with the Zora costume, but now she was used enough to it. It wasn't that well known to this galaxy, but she knew it well.

Jango had actually been impressed with her acting skills the first time they'd gone into seedier areas for information. Their relationship had improved quite a bit after that. Now they only wanted to shoot each other once a day instead of every second of every day.

(Seriously, why had Anakin thought this was a good idea?

Eh… probably because it had worked… or would work. She'd make it work.)

And as if her wandering thoughts had called him, the man himself walked into the cockpit, pausing when he saw her and leaning against the door instead of coming in all the way. That was… unusual. Siri raised an eyebrow at him. That would be the only question he'd get from her.

He seemed to gather himself if the tenseness in his jaw was anything to go by.

"I took your advice," he finally said.

That surprised Siri. He didn't often take her advice and had never acknowledged even when he had before. "Oh?"

Jango rolled his eyes at her tone. "Don't," he warned, obviously not wanting to put up with any gloating. She wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't shoot her still, so she didn't press it, even if she did smirk a little. "In any case, I… contacted Mandalore."

Okay, she *really* hadn't expected that. She perked up in her seat, interested. "Oh?!"

Jango glared, obviously still nursing his wounded pride at taking

advice from a *Jetii.* Siri just shot him an innocent smile he immediately saw right through, just as she'd predicted.

He huffed and mumbled under his breath as if asking why, "*Jetii.*"

Siri snickered.

The bounty hunter decided to take the high road and forced himself to keep speaking, even if it were through gritted teeth. "In any case… You were right. There… there are still clans that will support me if I make a bid for Mand'alor. More if I found and won the darksaber."

The Jedi let the amusement fall from her lips as she spoke seriously. "They're stuck between a rock and a hard place, Jango. Either they go with the New Mandalorians who want to practically erase everything in Mandalore's history and only keep records around to show people how 'bad' things used to be… or Death Watch. They need a third option."

Jango let out a long sigh. "I know that. I'm… just surprised that anyone would be willing to let *me* be that third option."

Honestly, Siri was kind of surprised he'd opened up to her about this at all. She needed to pick her words very carefully. "Why not?" she finally decided on, speaking the phrase slowly. "People remember Jastor. For good reason. Is it so hard to want to believe in that again? To believe you – who was raised by him – can give them that?"

The Mandalorian shook his head and snorted. "Can't believe I'm hearing that from a *Jetii.*" He said the word a little angrily, but with nowhere near as much venom as Siri would have expected. Still…

She slumped a little and looked out the window at the planet they were orbiting around. "Jedi or not, we're only sapient, we made mistakes. Bad ones. I'm not excusing them. If I could, I would apologize for the entire Order, and I'm willing to try and make up for those mistakes."

Another snort, but this one sounded bitter. "You can't," Jango muttered.

Siri could understand that, so she nodded. "Maybe not. But I will try."

Jango stayed quiet for several seconds, not looking at her – or anything, really – before speaking again. "In any case," he held up the datapad in his hand. "I have a list of as many as 25,000 families from

two hundred clans who are willing to foster or adopt multiple children. That's from Mandalore alone. I'm still waiting back to hear from some of the colonies and outposts. If we're lucky, that's around 300,000 kids."

The blond-turned-red-head brightened. "That's great, Jango!"

Instead of looking happy or pleased, the bounty hunter just looked tired. "Problem is, we're dealing with numbers in the *millions* right now. This doesn't even cover one complete batch." He tossed the pad away angrily. It landed on the control panel, but nothing happened, thankfully.

Siri winced. "We've gotten hits from interested parties on more than a hundred planets," she said slowly.

"I know," Jango replied, "But vetting anything with those kinds of numbers…" was a monumental task at best. At least they were only dealing with a fraction of the clones than what existed in the initial timeline. She even said as much. He let out another long sigh.

"I know," he said again.

The Jedi went on anyway, knowing if she outlined their plan, it would help him focus at the very least. "Once we have the proof that Palpatine was involved – that *he* ordered the clones under false pretenses, I think we'll get the numbers we need."

The Mandalorian nodded again, gaze fixed on the data pad. "I'll get 'em out no matter what." His eyes found hers after a moment. "I hate that we have to pay for them."

Siri raised an eyebrow in challenge. "You know as well as I do that it's better for them this way. Besides, if you're looking to get rid of numbers, I'd be willing to bet the Jedi Temple on Coruscant alone would be willing to take a couple hundred. They would be put to work and help upkeep the temple, but they would be given good homes."

Jango snorted. "Like I trust the Jedi."

Well, fair, but the red-head still rolled her eyes. "Think about it, Fett. Look, I'll talk to some people and make sure they answer to me. I can promise you they would be treated well. And that's not even talking about the corps. The Agricorps can most definitely use the help. Just ask who wants to become a medic or a farmer or an explorer."

He still looked a little unsure. "Maybe."

That was probably as good as she'd get right now. Still, she wasn't entirely finished and wanted him to make an informed decision. "I know other temples that would likely take some – not all of them are Jedi, even."

From the look he sent her, she'd pushed her luck far enough, so she backed off and moved on. "When it comes to the rest, there are millions of couples waiting for children on the planets I've been researching in my down time. Many of them would be willing to take in a child. At that point, we'll have to do our best to follow up, but we have to accept that we can only do so much." Because he was right, dealing with those kinds of numbers…

Jango shook his head. "No. This is my fault, I will right it."

Siri frowned. "It's *Palpatine's* fault. He's the one who set up Galidraan." And set off this entire chain of events.

The bounty hunter narrowed his eyes at her. "You still have no proof for that."

"I'm pretty sure Anakin does have that proof," she responded almost absently, looking back at her datapad, "but we'll see."

She could tell the bounty hunter still wasn't appeased and decided to offer him an olive branch. He wasn't entirely at fault for his situation.

"Jango, I promised you I'd help you with this, and I plan to follow up on that. I will do everything I can to find a good home for each and every one of your clones. And that's just for them growing up. I still like the idea of establishing a planetary colony they can relocate to on the Temple's credit, if they so wish when they come of age. I know Anakin and Master Yoda will help there, too."

He believed her… but at the same time, he didn't. And really, she understood.

"We'll see… Jedi," he finally said.

She rolled her eyes again and went back to her data pad. "Yeah, we will, bounty hunter."

They sat like that in a slightly tense but otherwise amicable silence for several minutes, until finally Jango got a ping indicating he'd gotten a

message. He checked his comm then glanced over at her.

"It's him. He has the information. Get ready."

Siri nodded solemnly and sat up as Jango maneuvered the ship towards the planet and then the correct port.

Because they were out getting the information they'd searched so long for, they missed the text several hours later informing them about the start of the gala and how Anakin would be on his way, as they'd asked him to.

They wouldn't get that until they got back well after the gala finished.

Chapter End Notes

AN: One of my betas brought up the difference between Mandalore and Mand'alor. For those who don't know, Mandalore is the planet and the culture. Mand'alor is the position of leader over the Mandalorian people. There are different cultural implications, but I'll leave that for you to look up if you're interested.

Thank you to Hidden50, Khalthar and Quathis for their help on this!

Discord: https://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anakin stared at the comm unit, waiting for a message from Siri. She knew what was at stake here. He doubted anything really immediate would come of the gala – nothing really could unless things went even more KUBAR than normal and Palpatine outed himself – but in the best case scenario, this could honestly make or break any plans they had for the chancellor in the future. He supposed Siri didn't *need* to respond, or really know a play-by-play, even, but just getting an 'ok' and a well wish would have calmed his nerves.

But he also knew that not everyone could return a call or a text on a mission. He knew she was fine, if focused right now, but it still worried him.

"Anakin," a familiar voice broke through his thoughts and he looked up to see Obi-wan's concerned face. "Are you ready to go?"

Anakin took a deep breath and shoved the comm into the pocket of his particularly nice set of white and cream-colored initiate robes. "Yes."

To Obi-wan's credit, he didn't ask if Anakin was sure. (He wasn't. He was so nervous about this…)

Together they made their way down to the ground floor where all of the initiates and padawans would meet. It seemed they were the last to show up as most of Anakin's friends were there already. Since Tru and Darra were both in the program as well, they'd asked Hik'te and Hale, respectively, to accompany them. Someone had even asked Thoran to come, much to the bothan's excitement. Maelee and Coira were also there, likely to see them off.

"Anakin!" Hik'te said loudly, waving him over. He decided he wouldn't mind a bit of a distraction, and the kids would probably provide a small one, so he acquiesced. As he approached the group, he could swear he sensed a spark of amusement from Obi-wan, so he shot the knight a glare.

"Do not say a word."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Obi-wan responded blithely.

Anakin snorted, rolled his eyes and joined his friends, all dressed in their finest and fidgeting excitedly. Except Maelee, ever the picture of calm.

"Hey, Ani," Hik'te said with a grin, although his eyes flicked to Obi-wan and back. "I was wondering who you asked to come. I thought you'd choose Maelee."

No, why would he… wait… Maelee was a calm presence with a good head on her shoulders. Had… he offended her by not asking? (And why did he have to ask that question even after more than forty years of social interactions, forced or not?)

He… should probably introduce them to Obi-wan. "Oh, this is Jedi Knight Obi-wan Kenobi. He found me and brought me to the Temple. He's also Ferus' Master."

Yeah, he probably shouldn't have said that as everyone flinched, even Obi-wan. The knight recovered quickly, though. "It's a pleasure to meet all of my padawan's friends."

"Master," the initiates all bowed or nodded respectfully.

"I wanted to bring Obi-wan because I'm an ambassador to the Chancellor," Anakin said. "I didn't want to put that kind of pressure on any of you." He turned to Maelee. "I did not mean to make you feel excluded."

"You didn't," she assured him, although he did notice that she seemed a little less tense after his words.

"And you, Coira," Darra added on.

The girl in question glanced at Anakin pointedly for a moment, then snorted. "I'm glad I don't have to go, actually. I always thought it sounded boring."

Truthfully, Anakin didn't want either girl anywhere near Palpatine. Even if Maelee didn't know everything (well, Coira didn't know everything either, but still), he didn't trust them anywhere near the Sith Lord. It was just too dangerous. Coira knew that, and Maelee had probably guessed something along those lines. Coira was creative and Maelee, utterly pragmatic and intelligent. Either one of them would make terrifying Sith… and that was in and above wanting to keep the

information they knew safe.

"Still sad you can't come," Darra said with genuine remorse.

"It's fine," Maelee said.

"Promise," Coira agreed.

Their reassurances seemed to encourage the other initiates. And that was Anakin's opening.

"So, each of you have your assignments for the drop-offs, correct?"

They all nodded, sobering quickly.

"And all of you received the special package from Master Yoda?"

Another affirmative.

Very well. "I cannot impress how imperative it is that you give the correct data stick to the correct Senator. Please bring them out."

The children did so, presenting the data sticks, three for each pair, two of which had blue dots on the top end, the third for each set had a red dot.

"Who does the red stick go to?" he asked, pointing to each pair.

"Senator Mothma," Darra said.

"Senator Organa," Hik'te said.

"Senator Bontari," Thoran said. "And don't worry, I'm going to be holding onto the data sticks the whole time."

Anakin nodded. "Good."

Tru, Anakin noticed, was biting his lip, looking troubled. He frowned. "Tru, is there a problem?"

"This just seems really… weird," he said, gaze turning to Obi-wan for a moment before looking back at Anakin. "There's more going on here than we know, isn't there?"

These kids were honestly too smart for their own good.

"Yeah," Thoran said as he put the data sticks away. "If it's so

important, though, then why us? I mean, we're just initiates."

"Unfortunately," Obi-wan said calmly, "we can't answer that. Just know that we have the utmost confidence in you."

Anakin watched as everyone finished putting their sticks away, and frowned. "What's on the blue ones?"

The other kids looked surprised.

"You don't know?" Darra asked.

"A day in the life of a Jedi from an initiate, a padawan, a knight and a master's point of view," Hale said quietly.

"Master Yoda said it was so people could understand what Jedi are like," Tru continued.

"He said the rest of the universe has a hard time understanding Jedi, and this should help," Coira said with a grin.

Anakin just blinked at them. Huh. So the old troll was hitting two hawkbats with one stone. Impressive. Perhaps he'd underestimated the Grandmaster.

Before he could say anything else, though, Master Windu and Master Yoda himself walked (and floated on a hover-chair respectively) into the room.

Windu spoke first, addressing the children by saying how he expected them to be on their best behavior, to not forget their manners or their drop-off assignments. He also told them that him, Master Yoda, Knight Kenobi and at least three other knights would be there if necessary. Anakin tuned him out pretty quickly, focused only on trying to calm his own nerves. After several seconds with only some success, he felt a hand on his shoulder and glanced up to see Obi-wan, eyes fixed on the Masters of the Order, but he didn't remove his hand. Instead he squeezed Anakin's shoulder reassuringly.

Part of him wanted to say he didn't need it… but part of him was more than grateful.

Stupid dichotomy that always seemed so much stronger when Obi-wan was involved.

"Very well, please board the transport," Master Windu said, gesturing

to the Temple doors and everyone began to shuffle out.

"Will you be okay, Anakin?" Obi-wan asked quietly.

Anakin took a deep breath and nodded determinedly. "Yes, thank you."

"You're welcome," Obi-wan said with a smile, patting Anakin's shoulder before releasing it.

The time-traveler appreciated it, but he couldn't really answer that question any other way. There were no two ways about it. He'd be okay tonight because he had to be, and that was all there was to it.

Ten minutes later, they were well on their way to the Senate's Annual Gala.

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In all of the stress and preparation, Anakin realized he'd forgotten one thing as soon as he walked through the door and saw the many senators and their entourages.

He *hated* parties. Well, parties like this where everyone dressed up like a Darskus Show-bird and strutted around like no one else mattered. All the verbal sparring and passive-aggressive comments hidden behind flowery language…

He shuddered.

As Vader, Palpatine had forced Anakin to these things more than once, likely just to get a kick at seeing him squirm and try to melt into the background… which wasn't likely because he was Darth Kriffing Vader. Before that, he'd attended his fair share of these things when with Padme or just as a Jedi and… no, he'd never liked them. Ever. He honestly couldn't understand why some people *did*.

"Anakin," Obi-wan's calm voice came from behind him and he realized he'd frozen just inside the door. His friends stood around him, looking worried. He blinked.

"Oh, right. I just… crowds," he said, gesturing to their surroundings. Even the implication wasn't untrue. He didn't like crowds, especially like this. Too easy to sneak up and kill someone.

"Will you be alright?" Hik'te asked, voice low and calm for once.

For a moment, Anakin looked around at all the worried faces of the initiates – not all of them even from his friend group. So young and yet they were willing to make sure he was alright. To go out of their way to do so, even.

He didn't like the Order.

But he found he liked many of the members.

So he smiled. "I shall be fine. I was merely… surprised."

A sigh from Hik'te, who shook his head fondly.

Anakin frowned. "What?"

"You're doing it again," Darra said with a giggle. "Talking all proper."

Wait… was he really? He examined his words and blinked again. Oh. "It seems I am."

"Well," Obi-wan said with a warm smile, "we didn't come here to block the door. Why don't you all go meet your Senators. I promise I'll take care of Anakin."

The children seemed hesitant, but at Anakin's nod, they wished him good luck and turned to disappear into the crowds. Once they'd gone, Obi-wan drew Anakin aside.

"Will you be alright," he finally asked – yet again – tone serious.

Anakin sighed and glanced around. "Yes. I just… dislike events like this. I'd forgotten just how much."

Obi-wan snorted. "I can see why we got along, then."

The time-traveler frowned. "But you're great at these things."

The taller man raised an amused eyebrow. "That does not mean I have to like them."

Ah. That… actually made a lot of sense.

Then Obi-wan's mirth vanished and he looked up, "Are you up to this?" Anakin followed his gaze and saw Palpatine discussing something with Mas Amedda happily. He even laughed. Such an actor.

"Yes," the former Sith said with a nod, then glanced up at Obi-wan.

"Let us be a distraction."

"Indeed," Obi-wan replied. Together they made their way through the gala crowd, projecting a mild 'don't look over here' feeling through the Force that should discourage most people from approaching them. They only stopped once they reached the area where the Chancellor stood, already talking to a group of Senators, glass of something alcoholic in one hand (likely mild, the Emperor had never been one to indulge in that sort of thing) while he waved his other hand gracefully to emphasize something he said.

All too soon, he noted Anakin's presence.

"Ah, Anakin, my boy! Glad to see you made it!" he said magnanimously. Then his eyes lifted to Obi-wan and his smile dimmed only the slightest bit. Huh, had that happened in the first life and Anakin just hadn't noticed? Likely. "And who is this?"

Obi-wan bowed. "Jedi Knight Obi-wan Kenobi," he introduced himself, turning on the full charm with that welcoming smile.

"He found me and brought me to the temple," Anakin said, trying to sound as childish as he could without making it over-the-top. They'd practiced this, and he was glad for it. "So when we were told we could bring someone else, I thought of him!"

"I was given permission since I've just come off of medical leave. This is a simple mission, close to home." Obi-wan chuckled and glanced out at the crowd. "Watch the children. Come with a friend." His tome was warm and honest as he put a hand on Anakin's shoulder.

"So you're the little Jedi that's been helping the Chancellor!" someone Anakin had never met before said a little too loudly. They were humanoid and had rather rosy cheeks. Likely drunk. "You're adorable!"

Adorable.

For the first time in a long time, he reminded himself that he couldn't kill random people for being ridiculous.

"Ah, yes," Palpatine said, and it was only because Anakin knew him so well that he saw that spark of annoyance in his eyes. "Senator Rothak Molae from Utrost."

The man certainly looked like he came from a core world, with the blue and green finery he wore, and his hair in an… interesting hairdo

that likely cost more than what most people spent on food in a month.

"A pleasure to meet you," Anakin and Obi-wan said more or less at the same time.

The guy *cooed* at him.

He'd known this would be a long night. He just hadn't known *how* bad it would be.

The evening wore on like that for the next couple of hours with Palpatine introducing Anakin (and by extension Obi-wan – Palpatine seemed very annoyed that Obi-wan managed to charm more or less anyone he came across) to different Senators or other people of import, up to and including the Trade Federation representatives. It wasn't Nute Gunroy this time. Anakin wondered what happened to him as he hadn't heard anything about the nemoidian, but he was thankful. He actually suspected the viceroy (former?) and his second-in-command had run away if Palpatine didn't know Anakin's identity yet. Maybe they were living in the unknown regions or something. Would serve them right.

(And he was particularly lucky if that was the case… oh Force. Or… was that the Force at work? Because Sidious should have been able to get to them… Anakin suddenly decided he needed to find out where they did go because he knew his former Master was *this* close to figuring out his identity, if he hadn't already…

And Anakin really needed to stop jumping to the worst conclusions.)

He was so distracted (not from Sidious, he wouldn't be stupid enough to not know exactly where the Sith Master was at all times) that he didn't notice the man flipping a switch. He did notice the strange force-field that rose, mainly because he happened to be standing right next to it.

He jerked back for a moment, half ready to attack something… but nothing had attacked him. He sensed no malicious intent… Frowning, he tentatively went to touch the area that had changed and he felt a prickling, but saw nothing and his hand went through whatever it was… a force field? Why would anyone…?

But then he realized where he stood. As far as Galas went, they tended to require a lot of standing, something most senators weren't tolerant of. Also, they needed privacy to strike deals or even just talk, so several comfortable rooms had been built around the large ballroom

for delegates to retreat to. The Chancellor had one as well, but as tradition dictated, it had to be within public view. So the Chancellor's sitting room had been built at the head of the ballroom. It was a small area on a dais of sorts with three fourths of the sides covered by a circular wall, all decorated in Palpatine's favored deep red and gold, with pops of bright red and black here and there. Sith colors, of course. A couple of armchairs and a small couch had been set up around a short table in the center.

"It's rather ingenious, isn't it?" Palpatine said when he noted Anakin's attention. The time-traveler stiffened, turning to him. "Here we are, in front of the entire Senate, and no one can hear a word we say. No signals can get in or out. Complete audio privacy and nobody will suspect much, because I'm just an old man who needs to relax his poor, aching joints every now and then."

The initiate said nothing, standing stiffly, eyes flicking to the force field and Obi-wan just behind it, speaking with several senators.

"Now, you can walk out of here at any time," Palpatine said as he sat down, every inch the picture of an old man taking a break, "or perhaps you'd care to hear me out."

Anakin immediately threw up the old walls he'd been so used to using as Vader, shoving all of his panic behind them and trying to mask himself in the Force. Then he swallowed and forced himself to open his mouth. "Why here? Why now? In front of everyone?" Because people could still *see* them.

Palpatine looked amused. "After our most recent meeting, I had the feeling something would arise and you would have had to, *sadly*, drop out of the ambassador program."

Well, he wasn't wrong. Anakin had even spoken with Master Xio, Girth and Yoda about it. (It was scary, just how right the man was, actually, but then, it was Sidious.)

Anakin did not want to stay. This… this was the Sith Lord he faced, not the Chancellor. The man still couldn't actually *do* anything without outing himself (that may very well have been a concession on Sidious' part), but it put Anakin in a similar situation. No one could hear them, as long as Palpatine didn't attack him, no one would believe him if he said anything. Probably wouldn't even be able to prove Palpatine had any sort of force field up at all.

But he could just walk out.

He could but…

Then what? He was here to play distraction. He had to keep all of the man's attention on him. Which meant…

Feeling a spike of worry from Obi-wan, he turned to see the man looking up at them, tensing as if to rush in. They couldn't have that. No, they had to give Palpatine what he expected. So he shook his head at Obi-wan, sent him a smile and reassurance through his bond before turning to Palpatine.

"I'm listening."

The man smiled. It wasn't a Palpatine smile, or a Sidious smile, but something in between. Just enough Palpatine to not put anyone who may be watching on alert, but just enough Sidious to let Anakin know who he was dealing with.

"Firstly, answer a question for me, will you? I'm curious. Why didn't you take the opportunity I presented in the office the other day. I could tell you wanted to."

Anakin tried not to panic and shoved that behind his walls too. He'd have to deal with it later. Preferably with Master Xio's or Girth's help. Right now, he needed to answer.

"Offer, sir?" he asked.

Palpatine's expression dried out. "Don't play stupid," he said, although he didn't move his lips… avoiding someone lipreading, probably. "It doesn't suit you." Funny, the Emperor would always lord the fact that Anakin wasn't on his intellectual level over 'Vader's' head. "We both know what offer I meant."

He was talking about killing Orn Free Taa.

Fine, if he'd taken his mask down, then Anakin needed to give him what he expected. He let his own expression cool.

"I don't make it a habit to in-debt myself to… men such as yourself."

Palpatine actually chuckled at that. "Speaking from experience, I assume."

Most definitely. "In a manner of speaking."

More laughing. "Oh, you are good. I can see why you were 'chosen' as

my Ambassador. Did you know from the beginning, or did you find out along the way?"

Oh, he knew about Anakin's true identity. He *definitely* knew. This could go so badly. He could hold so much over Anakin's head! And what could that do to the Temple's reputation! His mind screamed 'mayday' and 'abort' so loudly he almost physically heard it.

He wasn't going to give Sidious any information he didn't have to though, so he stayed quiet. The man must have realized he wouldn't get anything out of Anakin because he nonchalantly poured himself another drink.

"No matter, I suppose. Tell me, does the Temple know about you?"

Anakin tried not to panic even more. Master Yoda and Windu couldn't do anything for him if Palpatine outed him now! That was if they even wanted to. They had a lot of sway with the Council, but they were still just two people.

Palpatine took his silence as its own answer and cackled, hiding the cruel expression with a sip of his drink.

"Such skill and brilliance. Such potential. It's a pity you've chosen to waste it." He paused. "Or have you? You didn't have a choice in coming here, did you?"

No. He really didn't. He'd had to take Palpatine out. That meant Anakin had to be here. Had to go through his old life all over again. If it hadn't been for a few people – Girth, Master Xio, Siri… Yoda, even – it would have destroyed him.

"I wonder what he has over you."

Anakin blinked, shoving his puzzlement behind his shields and struggling to keep his face neutral. He only succeeded because even if he'd had a mask for decades, that didn't stop the Emperor from sensing his emotions through the Force. If he could keep his face in check, it helped with his emotions, if only by giving him something to focus on.

But he was out of practice.

"How is he, by the way? Your Master?" He paused and took a sip of his drink again, hiding his face. "Vader, was it?"

Anakin could only stare at him in shock. Because *what*? Wait… he didn't… he didn't know Anakin was Vader? (Or used to be.)

He didn't… know something?

"I would so like to meet him," the older man said as he lowered his glass and sent an endearing smile at Anakin, all the creepier with him knowing exactly what lay behind it… but that's what Palpatine wanted this time. This was still carefully calculated.

And he *didn't know*.

Anakin still shoved his relief behind his shields before he could really feel it. But… it was difficult. He was so used to Palpatine just knowing so many things – figuring it all out. It hadn't occurred to him that they would *succeed* in keeping any information from him. It just…

Kriff. He'd been putting the man on a pedestal again. And he hadn't even seen it until Palpatine had more or less outed himself. An oversight he could not afford to repeat. He'd gotten lucky this time, but next time…

He could still work with this, though.

Rule number one of manipulating manipulators: give them exactly what they expect.

So what did the Sith Lord expect. Either an informant or an apprentice infiltrating the Jedi on behalf of Vader – a reluctant infiltrator. And still a former slave.

He could *do* this.

"He doesn't contact me… often," Anakin finally admitted reluctantly. "Even if he did I… doubt I could convince him to set up a meeting."

"Why ever not?" Palpatine asked, playing the doting grandfather again. Did he want to drive his skill and acting home, or did he think Anakin would buy into the act?

The initiate was facing the Chancellor, away from the crowd or anyone who could read his own lips. Excellent.

"It's only 'tell me about' this or 'information' that." He could channel his frustration towards Obi-wan from his own padawan days – frustration he was in the process of letting go, and realizing he hadn't

had the proper context to understand, but it was still something he could refer to easily. "He doesn't *listen* to me! The moment I came here it's like he saw me as *tainted* or… or something."

"After you've done so much and put yourself in such danger?" Palpatine asked. Okay, he was likely assuming Anakin had bought into the 'sympathetic ear' routine… as he had the first time around.

"Exactly! The Jedi can't find out who I am! They'll kill me!" An all too real fear, even if one he did not think would happen anymore.

"And who are you?" Palpatine asked, eyes once again sparkling with that hungry glint that unnerved Anakin so.

That, too, went behind the shields.

"I don't have a name yet," Anakin muttered, looking down, mostly out of worry but hopefully Palpatine would take it as shame.

"But, are you not his apprentice?"

What would he say if they *were* talking about Obi-wan back then…?

"Exactly! It's like he's holding me back!"

"He's afraid of you."

Oh, it really was the same old song and dance routine again. That was exactly what he'd said about Obi-wan the first time.

(He'd been so manipulated. It was almost embarrassing at this point.)

(Girth was going to tear him a new one for thinking that later.)

How to respond? Give him what he expects… an infiltrator, spurned dark apprentice, former slave.

"H… he can't be afraid of me," Anakin protested. "I mean he… he's…"

"Powerful?" Palpatine snorted. "So powerful he sent you to spy on me instead of coming himself?"

"I…" Anakin started, unsure of what to say next.

Sidious took that uncertainty in stride. "I'm actually very disappointed in him. He's been so thorough, but he lacks such vision if he cannot see your potential and nurture it."

Oh, here it came.

"I would not make the same mistake."

Yup.

Kriff.

Anakin could only stare. This was getting too uncomfortable. He really wanted to leave… It was getting hard to breathe…

(That went behind his shields too.)

"Are you…"

"Offering to train you?" The old man said that behind his wine glass. "Of course, my boy."

"But… how would that work?" Anakin blurted out because he was genuinely curious.

"Well, first you'd remain in the Ambassador program, and I would teach you when you came to the Senate. After the program ends, well, it isn't unthinkable to remain friends. And I'm sure those fools over at the Temple would love to have an 'in' with the Chancellor."

His grin was just a little too sharp and Anakin couldn't help but laugh, a little hysterically.

Palpatine frowned and Anakin sobered immediately. He'd kriffed up! What—

"He told you I'd kill you, didn't he."

Wait… oh… right. Rule of two. Sith.

"He… he said your… philosophy was that there were only two… and you'd kill all the others."

Sidious' eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Others?"

Oh, he could play this off as a different Sith line! A hidden culture!

"I'm… pretty sure there are others he's teaching," Anakin muttered. It wasn't difficult to put in his own jealousy and disdain. Just think of Obi-wan teaching Ferus… yeah, that worked. (He may have to address that with Girth.)

"Well, he isn't *wrong*," Palpatine conceded. "But why ever would I take that out on you?"

Anakin blinked at him.

"I'm actually in the market for a good apprentice right now," he said (once again behind his wine glass, kriff him, he was too good at this). "And he seems to have dropped one right in my lap. Perhaps we should show him how wrong he is?"

"I…" Anakin started, shifting from foot to foot. He didn't know what to say next.

"Why don't you think about it, my boy? After all, unlike some people, I won't force you into something you do not wish to be a part of."

Lies. Or perhaps a truth from a certain point of view, because Palpatine would just *trick* people into doing what he wanted.

But, why was he letting Anakin go? He wouldn't do so unless he had a way to get to Anakin and ensure that he said nothing… or regretted saying something. Well, he was under the impression that the Temple knew nothing about 'the infiltrator' he'd projected. And the child Anakin had been acting as would likely be too afraid (had been too afraid in a previous life) to approach the Jedi. If he did, Palpatine would take Anakin down with him… or so he thought.

Had their plans and acting actually worked? Seriously? What had he overlooked? None of his plans ever worked like that.

"In the meantime," Palpatine went on, "if you have any questions, I'd be happy to answer them."

"How do you do it?" Anakin blurted out, his mouth once more getting the better of him. He blamed it on his child brain (and couldn't wait until he actually grew up… *again*).

Palpatine raised an eyebrow, once again the doting grandfather. "Do what, my boy?"

Well, in for a credit…

"I know who you are, and yet I just see… *this*," he gestured to Palpatine, who suddenly looked highly amused. "Just… *how*. Even when I know what I'm looking for it's so hard to see."

"Well, that is the point," Palpatine said, taking another sip from his wineglass. "But for me, it is merely a matter of motivation. I know what I want, I know what will get me there. I never let that leave my mind. That gives me the motivation to do what I must."

Anakin blinked. Was it honestly that simple?

And what would a young, impressionable boy who feels trapped ask now?

"Um… what do you want?" Was that good enough? He hoped it was.

Sidious snorted softly and brought the glass to his lips again. "What does your master want? What does anyone want? Power."

He smirked at Anakin as he lowered the glass. "I'm simply better at achieving it."

Something behind Anakin drew his attention and his smile dropped a little. "I believe your Jedi guard is getting antsy. Last minute change in plans, I assume?"

What would a hidden, infiltrating Sith Apprentice do? Probably complain.

Anakin could complain.

"He's the one who 'found' me, but he still thinks something's… off." Anakin grinned conspiratorially. "I think he wants to keep an eye on me."

Sidious snorted again. "Typical Jedi. Such incompetence."

That was something Anakin could agree with… or, well, he had experience agreeing with in any case. He didn't quite believe that anymore, even if the Order did need to change. (To be fair, it was changing, he just hoped it was enough.)

So he nodded emphatically. "It has been… frustrating, if amusing."

Palpatine grinned, behind his glass because that was all Sidious. "You and I will get along very well." He lowered his glass and gestured for Anakin to leave. "You should probably return to him, before he concludes that you're here to assassinate the poor, old Chancellor."

It was the time traveler's turn to snort.

"Oh, and I'm sure I don't have to say it, but speak of this to no one. I am a magnanimous man, but even I have my limits."

Oh, he didn't have to tell Anakin that.

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

Rot on Byss, sir.

"The force field won't harm you. You can step through it whenever you wish."

Somehow, that didn't make Anakin feel any better. The only reason he trusted Palpatine's word at all at this point was because he wouldn't out himself in front of the entire Senate.

"Of course, sir. I will… consider your offer."

With that, Anakin stepped through the force field, noting how much louder the room suddenly sounded.

"Anakin," Obi-wan said with a forced smile. "Did you enjoy your talk with the Chancellor?"

No. "Yes. It was… very informative."

The taller man blinked in puzzlement and looked back up at the sitting room, where Palpatine was already speaking with another party. He still sent a smile to the two jedi.

"He has excused me for the night, if you feel now is a good time to leave."

"I did just receive a call from Master Yoda saying that we should return to the Temple soon," Obi-wan said as he typed something out on the comm he held. Was probably sending that to Yoda so he could actually issue that message. Everyone should have dropped their packages off by now. He certainly hoped so.

Because he was very much done and needed to get away from Palpatine (and people), try and figure out exactly what was going on and the implications of everything that had just happened.

"Good," was all Anakin could bring himself to say.

The rest of the night passed in a blur, but eventually they got through the crowds and back to the door of the Senate, where the initiates had

gathered. Master Windu led them out the door once everyone was accounted for, and onto the transport. Anakin did scan it with the Force – twice – before they got on, but found nothing. Thank the Force for small favors.

The ride back to the Temple felt more like hours along the Hydian Way and by the time Anakin returned, he only wanted to confirm that everyone had dropped their packages off and go to bed. To his relief, all three pairs of younglings returned an affirmative when it came to the red-dotted data sticks.

Anakin congratulated them – he was pretty sure his pure relief surprised them – and then he retreated to his room, where he would sleep and he may very well not get up the next day. Because it was done. He'd finally gotten the information where it needed to go. Now all they could do was wait.

Wait and prepare. Because this was most definitely *not* the end.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Yeah, so everyone thinking this would be the big showdown... nope. We still have some things to address first. LOL Hope you liked the extra-long chapter!

Thank you to Hidden50, Quathis and Khalthar for their help on this chapter! Much luv, guys!

Discord: https://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mon let out a long breath and leaned back in her chair. As soon as she'd realized she'd been slipped something more than a 'gift' from the Jedi at the gala, she'd come to her private room, swept it for bugs and recording devices—three times—and connected the data stick to one of her private holoreaders—one that *couldn't* connect to the holoweb.

What she'd found went beyond her greatest fears and wildest nightmares. And that was simply at first glance. The more she thought about it, the worse it got. Every couple of seconds, it seemed, something new popped up to strike her, driving home just how big and deep this whole thing went. And if the Jedi were afraid to say anything about it, that alone spoke of immense danger. But they had to be afraid. Why else would they have gotten *children* at a *gala* to get this information to her? In public. In front of the very man they were supposed to be hiding this from.

That was the missing piece of the puzzle. What did Palpatine have on the Jedi that made them fear him so? Yes, their reputation wasn't always the shining pillar it used to be (and still was on some planets) but they were *Jedi*. People listened to them, even if they didn't like the Jedi.

There was something more here… which said a lot. Because apparently Palpatine had been slowly corrupting the Senate for *decades* now. And just how good was he if he could do that in front of everyone's face and still have so many *good* people support him?

She rubbed her temples to try and address the tension headache she could feel forming, and took several more breaths. She'd known there was something wrong in the Senate, but this?

She took a deep breath and steeled herself.

Well, she'd just have to deal then. She knew some places she could distribute the information. This had to get out… and it couldn't get traced back to her if it was that bad. If she could make sure it couldn't get traced back to *anyone*, all the better.

She had some planets in mind, not all of them aligned with

Chandrilla. Yes. She could get different packages of information out there, and someone could put it all together later. It would seem like multiple leaks instead of just a couple… because she couldn't be the only one in the Senate they trusted, right?

Right?!

She prayed she was right, because she didn't want to know. If the others had any brains in them, they wouldn't let on what they knew either, but would do exactly what she was doing: information distribution. Once they had enough support, *then* they could start addressing it publicly. But they'd have to move fast.

Realizing she wouldn't be getting any sleep that night, she sighed and tiredly opened a new application, ready to go over the information she'd gotten and begin selecting what she should put in each packet.

xXx

Anakin spent a lot of time the next day with Girth and Master Xio in another one of their combined sessions. They'd given plenty of reasons why moving the session to the day after the gala would be beneficial, but he suspected they just wanted to be there to support him. He appreciated it more than he could say (though he had tried to find the words, and would continue to, even if he didn't feel he could say it aloud just then).

Though, as much as he appreciated them being there for him, they weren't doing much more than analyzing what had happened and going over Anakin's thoughts and feelings regarding it. To be honest, he had a difficult time because he didn't feel much, and eventually they chalked it up to shock. It felt… pointless. That hadn't happened often in his counseling sessions, and he didn't like it. Was he getting to a point where they weren't helping anymore? Or was this just a hang up? They said he just needed time. Were they right? He'd been through so much because of Palpatine before that he didn't think shock was a valid response. Of course, both Girth and Xio nipped that in the bud quickly when he voiced that thought.

"Anakin," the drall said kindly, "shoulds and shouldn'ts. They…" he faded off with a pointed look and gesture for him to continue the phrase.

Hating how young he felt, the time-traveler sighed and finished it. "They obstruct what you actually feel and encourage unhealthy judgment when in reference to emotions." Though that wasn't the case

with everyone or even with him every time, it was a rule of thumb that helped him look past some of the mental blocks he had. Why was he having a problem with even acknowledging that now, then?

"Excellent," Girth said cheerfully.

"So," Master Xio inserted gracefully, "with that in mind, why do you feel you shouldn't be reacting in such a way, when you have reacted to difficult discussions and happenings in a similar manner before?"

He pushed aside his frustration, looking away. "I simply dislike having to work through this reaction over and over again. It has been two years. Should I not be over these by now?" Something told him that wasn't the case, but he couldn't see why. He was so *tired* of this and having to go through it so often. Couldn't he *learn*?!

"But," the smaller healer said slowly, "just because we've addressed this before doesn't mean you're automatically over it. You have to—"

"Keep addressing it," Anakin interrupted tiredly. "I know." That didn't help his frustration though.

Girth's expression morphed into something sympathetic, matching Master Xio's. "Anakin, when your mind has a thought, it creates shortcuts and paths through your brain. You can liken it to wearing a path through wilderness. If you use a certain path often enough, it becomes easier and easier to walk thdat path, which in turn makes it less desirable and often more difficult for you to walk anywhere else. That is why people get stuck in a mental rut, so to speak; not reverting to those same habits becomes more and more difficult the more you do it and think it.

"Conversely, making new goals is like creating new paths. You have to unlearn the unhealthy habits and relearn new ones to take their place, or your mind returns to those same old paths."

The time-traveler frowned as he looked at the drall. "We've been over this too."

Girth shrugged. "It bares repeating."

Master Xio nodded. "He's not wrong, Anakin. Backsliding and blocks happen in therapy just like they happen in life. We expected as much. It is nothing to be ashamed of. And this is more of a coping mechanism anyway, and not an unhealthy one either when used in moderation."

He appreciated that, he did, but… he snorted softly. "It's just so… frustrating."

"Of course it is," Healer Girth conceded wryly. "Otherwise healing would be far easier… and people would value it far less than they do now."

Fair. Still…

"That doesn't stop my frustration."

"No, it doesn't," Master Xio said while Girth nodded emphatically. "But you carved some of these 'paths' through your brain for at least four decades. That doesn't just go away."

A sick feeling began to grow in his stomach. "Does that mean it will take four decades to undo?" he asked, hoping he didn't look as horrified as he felt. He didn't know if he could handle that.

"Likely not," the drall assured him, hands up placatingly. "I won't lie to you, Anakin. Even years and decades from now, you'll likely come across something that brings you back to the darker times in your life. That's completely expected. However, most of the 'paths' we're addressing were formed subconsciously. Addressing them consciously brings your attention to them and can help speed up the process of changing them immensely. It's one reason we've been so impressed with your progress. You were open to the change. You put in the work and you want that change. Because of that, you've come a remarkably long way already."

"But something to realize," Master Xio inserted smoothly, "is that even people classified as 'normal' –in any given society—will have mental blind spots and problems. Perfection is not our goal here, as it is rather unreachable, even for Jedi." She winked at him and he managed a wan smile, if only for a few seconds.

"Master Xio is correct," Girth said, nodding in approval. "The goal is to get you to a point where you can *address* the problems yourself, prevent them from even happening, or recognize when you *can't* address things. Therapy helps to give you coping mechanisms for those instances as well as someone to go to if necessary. Learning from such therapy is a bit of a skill in and of itself in that way," he chuckled.

"The goal of therapy isn't to *fix* you, Anakin," Master Xio said with a soft smile.

"That would be us making you what we want," Girth said quickly, "which is a huge problem in and of itself; controlling and manipulative to say the least."

"Indeed," Master Xio went on. "Our goal has always been to help you fix yourself so you can be happier, healthier, and more productive. If therapy doesn't do that, you need a new therapist."

Anakin managed a small laugh at that. "Tooting your own horn there?" Not that he blamed them. They were good. Both of them.

"Oh, no," she said firmly, surprising her patient.

Girth nodded again. "A therapist may not work with a patient for a number of reasons ranging from that therapist reminding the patient of someone unsafe in their past to their styles or personalities clashing. Therapists are people too—sapient and fallible—"

"As you've probably learned in some of our sessions," Master Xio interrupted a little sheepishly.

The drall sent her a fond smile. Huh. It looked like they'd become pretty close friends in the time they'd been working with Anakin. For some reason, that made him smile warmly and relax. And maybe he'd been luckier than he realized to get therapists so compatible with him.

"All we can do is our best. Just like you," Girth finished with a smile.

One Anakin could return. Okay, maybe that session hadn't been quite so pointless after all. That realization also helped the knot in his stomach loosen. And, after his encounter with Palpatine, he… he'd really needed that.

"And with that, I think we're done for this session," the drall finished. "I do hope you are feeling better, Anakin."

"I am," he said truthfully. "Thank you for the new perspective."

He didn't leave with a smile on his face, but he was beginning to feel again, and that was definitely a win.

xXx

"I want to commend you all for your work the other day," Mace Windu said the next day, standing in front of Anakin's Ambassador class near the end of their period. "You did very well."

Next to Anakin, Darra raised her hand.

"Yes, Initiate Thal-Thanis," the Jedi Master said sternly.

To her credit, the red-head didn't back down. "Will we be graded on how we did?"

Mace shook his head. "This wasn't done for a grade. It was done for a purpose. And we can't tell what the outcome will be yet."

Several of the children seemed uneasy about that, which had Anakin shaking his head fondly. They'd better get used to it. Learning that consequences of their actions could come years later was a hard lesson, but a necessary one.

Mace nodded and went on, addressing the class again. "In any case, I just wished to tell you that. You will be going back to your normal schedule next time."

Anakin felt some relief in the classroom, some disappointment, and a lot of relaxation. Hmm. Maybe that was something he should bring up with the teacher? Or maybe it wasn't his place to say…

"In any case, you are dismissed. Thank you," Mace said, drawing Anakin out of his musings.

For a moment, he reveled in the lighter, calmer atmosphere. But then he remembered it would only be a matter of time before everything hit the proverbial fan. He needed to take advantage of this calm before the storm to get a leg up on Palpatine. And now that he didn't have the gala looming over him, he remembered he needed to speak with the Jedi Master. Again.

Joy.

"Hey, I'll be along later," he told Tru and Darra. "I gotta go talk with Master Windu first, though."

The two of them eyed him suspiciously, but didn't say anything. Instead, they both nodded, then turned and began to meander out with the rest of the kids. A couple had stayed behind, looking at Master Windu with varying degrees of fear and awe, but none had approached him. Which definitely relieved Anakin. He was more nervous about addressing the man about the subject he needed to than he'd like to admit.

"Master Windu, may I have a word in private?" he asked as calmly as he could.

The Jedi Master frowned, his forehead buckling the slightest bit, but he nodded and led Anakin out as the remaining students looked on. Anakin hoped they weren't jealous or something. In his opinion, talking to Mace Windu was not something to be jealous of, even now. The man was nothing if not intimidating.

"Is there something wrong?" Mace asked, the moment the door shut. With his worried expression, he was obviously referring to the situation with Palpatine.

The time-traveler shook his head. "Nothing immediate," he assured, then decided to add on after a moment, "at least when it comes to the Chancellor."

The slight frown returned to the older man's face. "What is it, then?"

Straight to the point, as usual. Anakin took a deep breath, hoping this would be better received than he feared. (Fear to anger to hate… he'd make sure it never got to the anger stage.)

"I was told recently that I need to master—or at least *begin* to master—the ability to use both the light and dark sides of the Force together. Or at least simultaneously."

Mace's eyes narrowed. "Told? By whom, if I may ask."

Anakin sighed. This would take a while to explain. "The Father."

The bald man's expression didn't change.

Anakin took the hint and began to explain. "In… my past life, about a decade or so from now, Obi-wan, Ahs… my padawan, and I were sent on a mission after the Temple received some coordinates in a suspicious manner. It was during the war, so it had to be investigated. It came at just the right time for us to be sent, despite us being a needed team in the war itself. But we were available and so we were sent.

"We came across a sort of dimensional pocket—at least that is the only explanation that makes sense to me—in which were living three beings that more or less embodied the Force: The Father, The Son, and the Daughter. The Daughter embodied the light. The Son embodied the dark. The Father… was both. He kept balance between his two

children, and had for millennia."

"They were… are immortal?" Mace asked slowly.

Anakin nodded. "More or less. They have life spans, but exponentially longer than even Master Yoda. Their life-spans were the problem, in this case, though. The Father… had some complication with his health, as I recall," it had been a while ago, and before he'd fallen, so some details were likely off, but he went on anyway. "I believe it had something to do with the chaos in the Force. In any case, he knew he would die soon, and wanted me to take over for him as the balance." He sighed. "Chosen one and all."

Mace's eyebrows climbed on his head, but he remained quiet otherwise.

"As you can imagine, I didn't want to give up my life to mediate between two squabbling children thousands of years older than me. I couldn't get away fast enough. We all just wanted to escape."

"I'm guessing that didn't happen," Mace said sardonically.

"Not immeiately." Anakin nodded. "Things happened, our ship was damaged, storms and night and darkness and The Son wanted to get off of the planet… or whatever it was. It got messier, people got possessed, The Son killed The Daughter, showed me something I have no memory of—I'm convinced he showed me my future…" he paused, thinking back on everything sadly. If he'd had everything dumped on him just then, he would have broken. He hadn't had the ability to cope, not well, especially not with Palpatine breathing in his ear for so long.

"You don't remember it?" the Jedi Master asked.

Anakin nodded. "The Father took those memories from me. For that reason alone, I'm very sure I didn't handle the revelation well." He snorted softly. "Go figure."

After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat and continued. "In the end, all three of them died and the whole… whatever they lived on, it wasn't quite a planet—was a facsimile at best—disappeared. It just… vanished in the Force. Ob… my team and I were supposed to rendezvous with our clone troops. Both groups had contact and said we'd arrived at the coordinates, but couldn't find each other before my team ended up on Mortis—the dimension."

Anakin took a deep breath. "I can't describe how in tune with the Force these people were, and I can't emphasize enough as to how *powerful* they were. No, how powerful they *are*.

"In this timeline, The Father contacted me in a vision. He told me that if I do not master the technique to use both sides of the Force at once, Palpatine will win. Or… at least, I will lose."

And if Mace looked troubled at that, well, good. He should be. "Does The Father want you to take over this time too?" the older man asked, surprising the time-traveler. Shouldn't he be more focused on Palpatine not being defeated?

Anakin blinked, but answered anyway. "Yes. Although he said that my actions have… helped to prolong his life due to the continuing balance of the Force." Mace raised one eyebrow in questioning skepticism, but Anakin shook his head and held up his hands. He had very little idea as to how that worked himself.

"In any case, he does want me to come, but later, when I'm ready… though I am not sure I will ever be."

Mace opened his mouth, but seemed to think better of it, and closed it for a second. After a couple of moments, he spoke more carefully. "Alright, ignoring some *very* important points in all of that, is he saying you'll be the one to arrest or… kill Palpatine?" He looked like he'd tasted something sour for a moment, and honestly, Anakin appreciated that. He appreciated that Mace didn't want him to be involved, especially not like that. But at this point, Anakin wasn't sure anyone *could* stop him from being involved, even if he'd wanted that.

He thought carefully about his answer before speaking. "Two years ago I would have said yes. Now… I'm just sure I have to be a part of it. Probably a large part of it if The Father took time and energy to warn me."

The Council member put a hand to his forehead, massaging it slowly. "The Council won't like that. *I* don't like that."

Anakin snorted and folded his arms. "You think I do?"

The look Mace shot him couldn't have been more deadpan. "Yes."

That made Anakin snicker. "Okay," he admitted, "you're not entirely wrong, *but*, if he disappeared and someone I trusted could guarantee he was truly gone, I'd be happy to sit back and watch." He felt the

smile on his face begin to fade as he went on. "I want to be involved because I *have* to see him dead—not just *feel* him vanish, not just get a report, not just sense him gone. He's too good at hiding. If I don't see his body myself, I won't believe it. I can't."

The two of them sat in silence for several seconds before Mace sighed and deflated tiredly. "You understand why you're making this difficult, right?"

Feeling just as tired himself, Anakin nodded, looking down. "Yes."

More silence until Mace shook his head. "I get it, Skywalker. More than you realize, I think. More than I would have gotten two years ago myself." He smiled, a little self deprecatingly while Anakin raised his eyebrows, shocked. He hadn't expected to hear that from Mace Windu himself.

Perhaps the Father was right about the changes coming into play here.

"From your point of view, everything you just said regarding Palpatine is entirely reasonable." He paused. "That doesn't mean I have to like it."

Anakin felt his smile come back, albeit wanly, but it was there. "Join the club."

Mace snorted softly, elegantly. Is that where Obi-wan got his ability to do that from? Jedi.

"So," the older man said, sitting forward and putting his elbows on his knees, letting his fingers meet each other in the middle. "I'm guessing you want my technique for channeling darker emotions without falling."

The time-traveler almost melted in relief. "*Please*."

Mace's eyebrows drew together again as he thought about that. "I'm going to be honest, I don't know if it will—if it *can*—work for you."

Anakin felt his hope begin to drain out, replaced by desperation, but he held it in check. "I have no other ideass where to go or how to start," he said quietly. Then his voice dropped even more. "And I would do anything to destroy his evil."

For several seconds, Mace studied the younger boy, eyes unreadable and Force presence muted to a point where even Anakin couldn't

begin to guess his thoughts. Finally he seemed to come to a conclusion. Anakin held his breath.

"Fine," Mace said, and like the almost-twelve-year-old he was, Anakin felt his face brighten. Stupid preteen body. "But first," the Master said before the younger could say anything, holding up a finger, "you have to master an exercise I give you. I am only giving you this exercise because I know you will be able to handle it due to your history, but I have to warn you.

"Have you learned partitioning yet?"

Anakin frowned. "Like, shielding?"

"More shielding parts of yourself from other parts. It's the basis for several high-level shield techniques."

The time-traveler thought about that. "I've… dabbled," he said slowly. "But I was only a knight before…" he faded off, looking down, ashamed.

"Was your 'dabbling' light or dark side based?" Mace asked pointedly.

Anakin sighed. "Dark."

To his surprise, the Jedi Master just nodded. "Then I can't say how different our techniques will be.

"So, the point is to partition off different parts of your psyche from the rest of your being, essentially hiding one part of yourself, but not another. It is not an easy feat for many, and several Masters spend years just getting this part down… though I have a suspicion you'll catch on much faster."

Anakin hoped he was right. He swallowed and nodded, but didn't say anything. The Master had more to say he could tell.

"The thing is," Mace went on, "this can be *badly* misused. Some Jedi have used it to compartmentalize to an extent that they don't recognize they even *feel* emotion anymore. Especially when you experience negativity, it can be tempting to just cut yourself off from that and forget it ever happened. Those Jedi in the past that did this were thought to be some of the best and most intellectual leaders of the last thousand years." Which explained so much. If that sort of mentality had even subconsciously been passed on… Anakin thought back to what the Father said about the Jedi, …*many [of the Jedi] have*

interpreted [the code] to a point where it is easier to simply not feel emotions than it is to exercise self control.

"And they were amazing, intellectual pillars…" the Master continued. "At least until they reached a point where they could no longer uphold that shielding."

Anakin winced, already knowing the consequences to something like that himself. Maybe not to that extent, but… he was very sure he didn't want to know how that felt.

Seeing his nod, the older Jedi returned the gesture. "Exactly. Shielding with the Force takes energy and concentration, even for the most experienced. Whether due to age, sickness, or other stresses, even those who only needed to allocate a small amount of energy and concentration to this technique eventually reached a point where they couldn't keep it up. They all had mental breakdowns, if they lived long enough to." Mace took a deep breath and locked gazes with Anakin, trying to convey the seriousness. "There is danger to this technique. A very subtle, but damaging danger.

"I have to stress that if you learn this, you *must* not do that. It will likely fail on you at the worst moment, when you need the most concentration. I need your word, Initiate, that you *will not* do that."

Anakin swallowed, but nodded and took a deep breath. "If I've learned anything since I've come back, it's that problems need to be addressed, not ignored." He'd be a hopeless cause if he hadn't learned that by this point, he thought sardonically.

His answer seemed to satisfy Mace though, as the man nodded and held his hand out. Anakin blinked and looked down at it, before raising an eyebrow at the Jedi master in question.

Mace looked mildly amused in return. "It's the easiest way for me to show you," he said nonchalantly. "I could do it without physical touch, but this makes it easier. It would be easier with a bond…"

Anakin felt his own expression dry out. "I haven't made up my mind yet. This isn't me accepting padawanship."

Mace just nodded. "Very well." He still held his hand out.

Trying not to be suspicious, Anakin took it. He felt the older man's aura reach out for his and sank into the Force. Following Mace's surprisingly gentle guidance, he watched as the man opened a part of

himself to Anakin, showed him the barrier between the two parts of himself—different concepts and emotions—and then carefully split them apart as he showed Anakin how to set up a barrier. It wasn't as clear as it could have been, but it was enough for Anakin to get the basics.

Then, after the shield had stabilized, Mace took the first partition down and Anakin's eyebrows rose on his forehead in surprise.

He'd never personally witnessed the workings behind Master Windu's mind. He'd seen Obi-wan's inner mind (a bunker in a beautiful, calm field), and Obi-wan had seen his (an asteroid field he liked to navigate), as had Ahsoka (whose inner mind had been her version of the Jedi Temple), but he hadn't been close enough to any other Force Sensitive. It was a personal thing and saying that he and Mace had never been that close before was a bit of an understatement. What he found now was a veritable cube of moving boxes, opening and closing, switching and sliding, combining and separating.

And that was all conscious?! Because he could sense conscious use of the Force. Okay, Anakin was impressed.

After a moment, he felt Mace pull back and did so himself, still processing what he'd sensed as he opened his eyes again.

"You'll need to come up with your own imagery," Mace said, drawing Anakin's attention again. "Something that is easily closed and water or space proof tends to work the best. Some people use bubbles, or tanks for water, or prison cells… whatever it is, it needs to work for you. My mind is very organized, but there have to be areas for messiness in that case. If you prefer something messier, you need some areas that are organized. That is where you will set this particular exercise up initially.

"The point of this is that if I were a foreign entity who comes knocking on your mind, you need to be able to make me work for every piece of information I take. If it takes me two minutes to get through your barriers, and then I'm faced with another one, and another one… it can get daunting. But if it takes *ten* minutes to get through a barrier, it can be impossible to find what I need.

"At least, that is the basic concept."

Anakin found himself nodding thoughtfully.

"It takes practice to set up quickly, but the faster you do, the better

you'll be able to control it. However, I just need to make sure you can do it before we can move on."

The time-traveler met the Jedi Master's eyes. "I… should be able to adapt some techniques, or figure it out otherwise," he finally said, fairly confident in his words.

Mace nodded. "Good. Succeed in that, and I'll show you the next step."

After one final moment of thought, Anakin nodded firmly. "Very well."

Mace just smirked. "Good luck, Initiate."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Okay, so A. No, this isn't abandoned. I just had a bit of burnout. Sucks, but it happens. Right now I have two other chapters in first draft and back from one of my betas. I just need to send it to my other beta. However, I'm going to go back to posting once a month so I can hopefully avoid it again.

I hope you enjoyed this. :)

Thank you to Hidden50, Khalthar and Quathis for their help on this. :D Some of you hear almost nothing from me for 7 months and all of you are still happy to jump back in and help an author out. :D Thank you.

Last but not least, I entered a contest! The formatting got screwed up though. TT . TT If you're ok with some off-screen suicidal themes, and you have a reedsy account, here is one of my original short stories. :D

https://blog.reedsy.com/short-story/zm7i8k/

Discord: http://discord.gg/xDDz3gqWfy

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!